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### NOTE BY THE TECHNICAL SECRETARIAT

#### UPDATE ON THE IMPACT OF THE OUTBREAK OF THE CORONAVIRUS DISEASE (COVID-19) ON THE ORGANISATION FOR THE PROHIBITION OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS PROGRAMME IN 2021

1. On 26 August 2020, the Technical Secretariat (hereinafter “the Secretariat”) issued a Note updating States Parties on the impact of the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) programme in 2020 (S/1890/2020, dated 26 August 2020), following Notes S/1876/2020 (dated 3 June 2020), S/1870/2020 (dated 17 April 2020), and S/1863/2020 (dated 20 March 2020). The present Note provides an update for States Parties on the impact of the outbreak of COVID-19 on the OPCW programme in 2021.

#### STAFFING

2. In accordance with the Roadmap for Return to work at OPCW Premises, developed by the Secretariat’s Task Force on COVID-19 and approved by the Director-General, and which follows the Dutch coronavirus guidance, Secretariat staff are currently working remotely unless work on OPCW premises is absolutely necessary. This posture allows the Organisation to maintain operational effectiveness during the pandemic, while prioritising the health and safety of all OPCW personnel and visitors to OPCW premises.
3. Group visits and private visitors to OPCW facilities remain suspended until further notice.

#### MEETINGS

4. The Ninety-Sixth Session of the Executive Council (hereinafter “the Council”) is currently scheduled to take place as an in-person meeting in the Ieper Room at OPCW Headquarters from 9 to 12 March 2021, in principle on the basis of the same modalities as those adopted for the Ninety-Fifth Session held in October 2020. The Bureau of the Executive Council will review whether any adjustments need to be made in light of the pandemic situation, as well as the modalities, in order to ensure the health and safety of all delegates and staff involved in the event. As done previously, health and safety information and guidelines will be provided to all participants in advance of any session.



5. The continuation of the Twenty-Fifth Session of the Conference of the States Parties (Part II) is expected to take place prior to the end of April 2021. At this stage, it is anticipated that modalities similar to those applied to Part I (held from 30 November to 1 December 2020) will be used. Further information will be provided in due course.
6. There has been no change to previous guidance on requests by States Parties to use meeting rooms at the Headquarters. For the time being, informal in-person meetings cannot, unfortunately, be accommodated. The Secretariat may be able to provide technical support to States Parties wishing to hold remote meetings.

### **ACCESS TO OPCW HEADQUARTERS**

7. The OPCW cafeteria remains open for take-away only. Measures to ensure the health and safety of staff and customers have been implemented.
8. In addition, the duty free store is now open three days a week (Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, from 10:00 to 17:00), with preventative measures in place. The store operator also offers the opportunity to make an appointment during the above opening hours.

### **VERIFICATION**

9. With respect to Article IV inspections, the Secretariat continues its verification activities at the chemical weapons destruction facilities, under temporary modifications in accordance with Secretariat Notes EC-94/S/1, EC-94/S/2, EC-94/S/3, and EC-94/S/4 (all dated 6 April 2020), in light of the need to take measures to ensure the health and safety of inspectors and personnel at the sites, and taking into account the applicable health and safety regulations of the United States of America. Regarding chemical weapons storage facilities, the Secretariat conducted two storage inspections during October 2020. The Secretariat continues to closely consult the National Authority of the concerned State Party in this regard.
10. Inspections related to chemical weapons abandoned by Japan in the People's Republic of China continue to be postponed at the request of the concerned States Parties and will be rescheduled in consultation with both States Parties. The Secretariat conducted a virtual meeting with the States Parties in December 2020 to discuss actions related to future inspections. The next trilateral meeting between the Secretariat and the two concerned States Parties will take place in March 2021, in virtual format.
11. Regarding old chemical weapons (OCW), the Secretariat, in consultation with the concerned States Parties, was able to conduct five OCW inspections in France, Belgium, Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The Secretariat continues to work closely with States Parties hosting OCW inspections on appropriate measures to provide safety to OPCW inspectors and State Party site personnel.
12. Inspections related to Article V and Council decision EC-67/DEC.7 (dated 16 February 2012) in respect of former chemical weapons production facilities will take place later in the year when circumstances allow, in consultation with the concerned State Party.

13. Concerning Article VI inspections, the Secretariat developed a plan to resume such inspections, taking into account national measures in place to combat the spread of COVID-19 as well as the health and safety of inspectors. The Secretariat presented the plan to all States Parties in June 2020 through the vehicle of the Industry Cluster.
14. H.E. Ambassador Marcin Czepelak, Vice-Chairperson of the Council and Coordinator for Chemical Industry and Other Article VI Issues, reported to the Council in July 2020 on this activity and States Parties' general agreement to the plan. Further updates were provided at the October 2020 meeting of the Industry Cluster and the November 2020 annual meeting of National Authorities.
15. The Secretariat accordingly conducted a limited number of Article VI inspections from September to December 2020. The Secretariat continued to prioritise inspections at Schedule 1 facilities, as well as at Schedule 2 and Schedule 3 plant sites where initial inspections had not yet taken place, as required under the Chemical Weapons Convention (hereinafter "the Convention"). Where practicable, the Secretariat also carried out some inspections at other chemical production facilities (OCPFs), as well as subsequent inspections, in order to make the best use of available resources and opportunities. However, it was not possible to complete all 241 Article VI inspections in 2020, owing to the measures taken in response to the pandemic situation. Ultimately, 82 planned Article VI inspections were carried out by year end 2020. In addition, for some of these inspections it was not possible to issue final inspection reports within the time frame laid out in the Convention, owing to measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic situation. Those inspections that were not completed before the end of the year 2020 have been prioritised for 2021.
16. In the OPCW Programme and Budget for 2021, 241 Article VI inspections are again mandated. Owing to the measures taken in response to the worsening pandemic situation in December 2020, Article VI inspections, with the exception of those deemed critical, were suspended until at least 2 March 2021. The Secretariat has sought urgent consultations with various States Parties in which a significant number of Article VI inspections are to be carried out, in order to explore ways to allow such inspections to proceed. In some cases, the States Parties concerned are not yet in a position to respond to the Secretariat's requests. Under such circumstances, it becomes increasingly unlikely that the Secretariat will be able to carry out all of its mandated Article VI missions for 2021. The Secretariat will provide regular updates on progress towards the 2021 inspection plan during meetings of the Industry Cluster and the Council.
17. Missions of the Secretariat in the Syrian Arab Republic are continuing in close consultation with the Syrian National Authority.
18. The Secretariat continues to receive and evaluate States Parties' declarations and amendments under Articles III, IV, V, and VI of the Convention.
19. The Secretariat continues to organise the official OPCW proficiency tests for environmental and biomedical samples. The Forty-Eighth Official OPCW Proficiency Test started in October 2020, and the evaluation discussions and individual meetings for the test will be held virtually in February 2021. In addition, the Secretariat has begun preparations for both the Sixth Official OPCW Biomedical Proficiency Test (scheduled to begin in February 2021) and the Forty-Ninth Official OPCW Proficiency Test

(scheduled for April 2021). The Secretariat continues to organise the official OPCW exercise for the analysis of biotoxins. The Fifth Official OPCW Biotoxin Exercise is currently in progress. Samples were dispatched in early December 2020. The test will conclude at the end of February 2021 when evaluation of the reports will commence at the OPCW Laboratory. The preliminary report on the exercise will be published in April/May 2021, with a final report being made available after the meeting of participants planned for July 2021. The challenges posed by the ongoing restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have been an impediment to the development of the biotoxin exercise. In addition, the OPCW Laboratory has recently put in place the infrastructure to perform immunological assays (detection and activity) for toxins. In the coming months, the OPCW Laboratory will develop simplified assays for transmission of the methods to interested laboratories. The OPCW Laboratory has also established a multi-entity collaboration in order to produce and distribute standardised antibody reagents for the detection of ricin, the production of which will dovetail with the current ricin detection exercise.

20. The Secretariat continues to update the OPCW Central Analytical Database (OCAD). A total of 141 new analytical data sets, including 20 data sets on newly scheduled chemicals, were sent to the Validation Group for evaluation. The Fiftieth Meeting of the Validation Group, and subgroup meetings to discuss the evaluation of new analytical data for possible inclusion in the OCAD, were held remotely via videoconference in September 2020. As a result, 111 data sets were accepted by the Validation Group at the meeting and will be presented to the Council at its Ninety-Sixth Session for its approval. The OPCW Laboratory has continued testing and maintaining mission gas chromatography/mass spectrometry instruments to ensure readiness for the resumption of sampling and analysis activities.

#### **INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND ASSISTANCE**

21. Despite the operational restrictions imposed by the pandemic, the Secretariat has continued to deliver on its international cooperation and assistance mandate and to provide capacity-building support to States Parties. In 2020, the Secretariat organised a total of 48 capacity-building events benefitting 1,550 participants. Of these events, 39 were convened virtually, including 24 during this reporting period, allowing for continuing engagement with and among State Party experts and other stakeholders in support of Convention implementation.
22. The Secretariat is committed to resuming face-to-face training activities as soon as the circumstances permit, and will continue to engage with interested States Parties to that end. A tentative and flexible plan is currently being prepared, foreseeing the resumption of such activities in the latter half of this year, with much flexibility built in to nimbly adapt to evolving pandemic conditions as needed. As the year progresses, the feasibility of activities will be regularly monitored and adjusted, in due coordination with all partners and stakeholders.
23. At this time, owing to the ongoing travel restrictions, it has been necessary to postpone activities that absolutely require physical presence and interactions—i.e., the Fellowship Programme, where selected fellows are sent to their respective host institutions to complete their planned research. The Secretariat is hopeful that these fellowships may take place in the second half of the year.

24. Building on the experience gained in organising online learning opportunities in 2020, the Secretariat continues to strive to enhance such delivery methods to supplement and complement its traditional in-person training methodology, with a view, in the longer run, to strengthening the overall effectiveness and efficiency of its capacity-building offerings.

**NEXT STEPS**

25. The Secretariat will continue to closely monitor the situation and to adopt appropriate mitigating measures, and will keep States Parties apprised of any relevant developments.

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