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NOTE BY THE TECHNICAL SECRETARIAT

UPDATE ON THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK ON THE ORGANISATION FOR THE PROHIBITION OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS PROGRAMME IN 2021

1. On 5 July 2021, the Technical Secretariat (hereinafter “the Secretariat”) issued a Note updating States Parties on the impact of the outbreak of COVID-19 on the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) programme in 2021 (S/1967/2021, dated 5 July 2021).¹ The present Note provides an update for States Parties on the continuing impact 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, the Secretariat began a gradual and safe increase in the number of staff on premises, starting on 27 September 2021. From that date, Secretariat personnel work at least two days per week at OPCW premises.
3. Routine face-to-face meetings, including training events and those involving States Parties, as well as group and private visits to OPCW facilities, were allowed to resume on 27 September.
4. The 1.5m-distancing rule will remain in place within OPCW premises, as will the requirement to wear a face mask while moving around the buildings.

MEETINGS

5. The Ninety-Eighth Session of the Executive Council (hereinafter “the Council”) is taking place as an in-person meeting in the Ieper Room at OPCW Headquarters from 5 to 8 October 2021, in principle on the basis of the same modalities as those adopted for the Ninety-Seventh Session held in July 2021. As done previously, health and safety information in the form of guidelines was provided to all participants in advance and, if required by the current pandemic situation, some adjustments in organisational modalities might be introduced in order to ensure the health and safety of all delegates and staff involved in the event.

¹ Previous updates were provided in Notes S/1930/2021 (dated 18 February 2021), S/1890/2020 (dated 26 August 2020), S/1876/2020 (dated 3 June 2020), S/1870/2020 (dated 17 April 2020), and S/1863/2020 (dated 20 March 2020).



ACCESS TO OPCW HEADQUARTERS

6. The OPCW cafeteria is open and is offering limited seating. Measures to ensure the health and safety of staff and customers have been implemented.
7. In addition, the duty-free store is open four days a week (Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays 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

8. With respect to inspections under Article IV of the Chemical Weapons Convention (hereinafter “the Convention”), the Secretariat continues its verification activities at the chemical weapons storage and 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). The Secretariat and the United States of America have reviewed the current pandemic situation and agreed to resume normal verification activities at the respective sites from 23 September 2021. Should the pandemic situation deteriorate, the Secretariat and the United States may decide to reinstitute the temporary modifications to verification activities.
9. Inspections related to chemical weapons abandoned by Japan in China continue to be postponed and will be rescheduled in consultation with the concerned States Parties. The Secretariat continues to consult with both concerned States Parties in this regard.
10. The Secretariat has conducted five old chemical weapons inspections since January 2021 and continues its consultations with the other concerned States Parties in order to implement the 2021 inspection plan. 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 be rescheduled to take place later in the year when circumstances allow, in consultation with the concerned States Parties.
11. Concerning Article VI, the Secretariat had conducted 38 inspections as of 1 October 2021. These include initial inspections at two newly declared Schedule 1 facilities. The Secretariat continues to give particular priority to Schedule 1 inspections, as well as initial inspections of Schedule 2 and Schedule 3 facilities. Some other inspections have been conducted where possible.
12. Under the current circumstances, and in spite of extensive consultations with the States Parties concerned, it has regrettably not been possible to establish the necessary basis on which the majority of planned inspections can take place. The Secretariat will therefore not be able to carry out all of its mandated Article VI missions for 2021. The Secretariat will provide an update on progress towards achieving the 2021 inspection plan during the meetings of the Industry Cluster and regular sessions of the Council, and will continue to work closely with States Parties in order to identify the modalities necessary to allow inspections to be carried out.

13. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect the Secretariat's ability to deploy to the Syrian Arab Republic. The Secretariat is maintaining its readiness for deployments, which are being conducted subject to the evolution of the pandemic. The travel restrictions notwithstanding, the Secretariat is continuing its mandated activities related to the Syrian chemical weapons programme and its engagement with the Syrian Arab Republic in this regard.
14. The Secretariat continues to receive and evaluate in a timely manner all States Parties' declarations and amendments under Articles III, IV, V, and VI of the Convention.
15. The Secretariat continues to encourage States Parties to adapt to and use the Secure Information Exchange (SIX) system to transfer securely classified documents related to declarations. This reduces the need for in-person handover of documents at OPCW premises.
16. The Secretariat continues to host environmental and biomedical proficiency tests in order to validate the capabilities of laboratories receiving authentic samples for analysis. The Forty-Ninth Official OPCW Proficiency Test and the Sixth Official OPCW Biomedical Proficiency Test were finalised in August 2021.
17. The Secretariat continues to organise the official OPCW exercise for the analysis of biologically derived toxins. These exercises further enhance OPCW partner laboratories' capabilities in this area and help to develop commonly accepted analysis and reporting criteria. In December 2020, the OPCW Laboratory began the Fifth Exercise on the Analysis of Biotoxins. This exercise was completed in June 2021. Samples for the next exercise have been prepared and are undergoing testing. Nominations for the Sixth Exercise on the Analysis of Biotoxins are open until late November 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.
18. The Twelfth Convention Chemical Analysis Competency Test (CCACT) was finalised in September 2021. Nine laboratories from seven States Parties participated in this test. The Thirteenth CCACT is scheduled to begin in October 2021.
19. The latest release of the OPCW Central Analytical Database (OCAD) (v23_2021) is available on DVD and USB flash drive. This version of the OCAD has been updated with data on scheduled chemicals, including the newly scheduled chemicals as approved by the Conference of the States Parties at its Twenty-Fourth Session through decisions C-24/DEC.4 and C-24/DEC.5 (both dated 27 November 2019), as well as with data on non-scheduled chemicals relevant to the Convention, approved by the Council at its Ninety-Sixth Session (EC-96/DEC.2, dated 9 March 2021). The Fifty-Second Meeting of the Validation Group took place in September 2021.
20. A Laboratory Information Management System (LIMS) project is being implemented at the OPCW Laboratory. The LIMS software will be a key tool in the management of sample inventory and laboratory instruments, consumables, and chemicals. The LIMS will further develop the existing Quality Management System (QMS) in accordance with International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standard ISO 17025. The project began on 1 June 2020 with the involvement of OPCW Laboratory staff in virtual training and workshops. The final phase of the project began in June 2021 and is ongoing.

21. The OPCW Laboratory has continued to test and maintain mission gas chromatography/mass spectrometry instruments to ensure readiness for the resumption of sampling and analysis activities.
22. The OPCW Laboratory's QMS-related activities continue. A reassessment of the Laboratory's accreditation under the ISO and International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) standards ISO/IEC 17025:2017 and ISO/IEC 17043:2010 was successfully carried out on 3 August 2021 by the Dutch Accreditation Council, the *Raad voor Accreditatie*, through remote assessment using Microsoft Teams.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND ASSISTANCE

23. Despite the operational restrictions imposed by the pandemic, the Secretariat has continued to deliver on its international cooperation and assistance mandate in an agile and flexible manner, providing a wide range of remote capacity-building support to States Parties, as well as a limited resumption of the Fellowship Programme. A timely return to face-to-face training opportunities remains a priority and the Secretariat continues to evaluate pandemic-related travel restrictions with a view to resuming these activities as soon as circumstances permit.

NEXT STEPS

24. 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.