



United Nations Office
for Disarmament Affairs

The Secretary-General's Mechanism

Issue 1, February 2021

Newsletter for Nominated Experts and Analytical Laboratories for the Secretary-General's Mechanism for the Alleged Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons

Dear Colleagues,

Welcome to our first newsletter!

The newsletter is intended to provide the nominated experts and laboratories with information on the Secretary-General's Mechanism for Investigation of Alleged Use of Chemical or Biological Weapons (UNSGM), to update on recent or planned activities, to strengthen the readiness to deploy and to provide an informal forum for sharing experiences and knowledge related to the UNSGM. We start with a greeting by Izumi Nakamitsu, the Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs.

In this first edition, you will find general information on the mandate and structure of the UNSGM as well as on the roles of expert consultants, qualified experts and analytical laboratories nominated by the Member States. You will also get to know one of your fellow experts and learn about recent activities supporting the readiness of the UNSGM. In recent years, UNODA has cooperated with Member States and partnered with international organizations to implement outreach and training activities. However, due to the pandemic, most of the planned activities in 2020 had to be postponed. Still, we remain optimistic that we will have more training and outreach activities to report in future editions.

Please enjoy the newsletter and let us know if you have any feedback.

Your UNODA team in support of the UNSGM,

Ioan Tudor,
Chief, Weapons of Mass
Destruction Branch

Christine Uhlenhaut,
Senior Programme Officer

Hideki Matsuno,
Political Affairs Officer

Courtney Cresap,
Political Affairs Officer

Dear Experts,

The current COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the global disruption which infectious diseases can cause. A disease deliberately manipulated to be more virulent, or intentionally released in multiple places at once would trigger an even more severe global crisis with widespread security repercussions. So, while we consider how to improve our response to future disease threats, we should also ensure that serious attention is given to preventing and preparing for the potential deliberate use of diseases or toxins as weapons.

While the Biological Weapons Convention sets a strong norm against the development and use of biological weapons, the United Nations Secretary General's Mechanism (UNSGM) is the only instrument that provides a framework for investigating the alleged use of such weapons. Your governments have nominated you as experts and analytical laboratories to support a UNSGM investigation in response to a report by UN Member States or otherwise provide service and advice at short notice if called for by the Secretary-General. The credibility of a UNSGM investigation rests in its ability to establish the relevant facts objectively and scientifically. Therefore, a fully operational UNSGM depends upon, inter alia, the Secretary-General's ability to receive impartial and expert advice from you.

I appreciate your readiness and willingness to be called upon for a mission and active participation in UNSGM-related activities. We look forward to continuing our fruitful cooperation. With best wishes for a healthy, peaceful and productive 2021.



Izumi Nakamitsu
United Nations High Representative for Disarmament Affairs



The UNSGM's Mandate

In 1987, with General Assembly Resolution [A/RES/42/37](#) (C), the UN General Assembly gave the Secretary-General of the United Nations the authority to carry out investigations in response to reports from any Member State concerning the possible use of chemical, bacteriological (biological) or toxin (CBT) weapons that may constitute a violation of the 1925 Geneva Protocol or other relevant rules of customary international law in order to ascertain the facts of the matter, and to report the results of any such investigation to all Member States promptly. This authority was reaffirmed one year later by the Security Council (Security Council Resolution [620 \(1988\)](#)). The following year, experts appointed by the Secretary-General developed Guidelines and Procedures for such investigations, which were endorsed by the General Assembly (General Assembly Document [A/44/561](#)) and provide details for the preparation and conduct of UNSGM fact-finding missions, including technical procedures, the roles of expert consultants, qualified experts and analytical laboratories, as well as report writing. In 2007, the technical [appendices](#) of the Guidelines and Procedures (A/44/561) were updated to reflect developments in relevant technical aspects.

Since the entry into force of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the foundation of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the OPCW is responsible for investigations of alleged use of chemical weapons, except for investigations related to countries that are not a party to the Convention. In such cases, the Secretary-General should cooperate with the organs provided for in the CWC in carrying out investigations in accordance with the guidelines and procedures for the UNSGM (A/44/561) and the relevant provisions of the CWC. For the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), there is no equivalent organization, no "OPBW", and thus the UNSGM remains the only mechanism for investigating the alleged use of biological weapons. For these reasons, our current efforts to strengthen the readiness of the UNSGM focus on biological events.

Past UNSGM Investigations:

Under the current UNSGM guidelines, investigations took place in Mozambique and Azerbaijan in 1992. UN documents [S/24065](#) of 12 June 1992 and [S/24344](#) of 24 July 1992 respectively detail the results of those two investigations.

The most recent activation of the UNSGM was in March 2013, when the Secretary-General established the UN Mission to Investigate the Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic (not party to the CWC at the time). UN document [S/2013/553](#) reports the results of the investigation.

Structure and support of the UNSGM

As custodian of the UNSGM, UNODA is tasked with ensuring the readiness to launch a mission in response to reports from Member States. It is important to note that the UNSGM is not a standing investigative body. According to the guidelines and procedures, UNODA maintains rosters of experts and analytical laboratories that may be called upon to support a UNSGM investigation. UNODA coordinates and cooperates on training activities with the Member States and international organizations (including the WHO, INTERPOL, or OPCW). Examples include workshops for expert consultants, regional outreach activities, training activities for qualified experts, including a hostile environment awareness training, field exercises that follow realistic scenarios as well as external quality assurance exercises for the analytical laboratories. These activities aim to raise awareness and build capacity, introduce and practice core skills, especially with a view to investigations. Still, they also

aim to develop sustainable networks of professionals across disciplines and sectors that will have to cooperate if an investigation is launched.



UNODA also coordinates with the UN Internal Task Force (UNITF), composed of points of contacts to the UNSGM from various departments in the UN Secretariat and other UN entities that will be critical for the successful implementation of a mission in response to a request from Member States. Members of the UNITF include the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, the Department of Safety and Security, the Department of Operational Support, the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, the Office of Legal Affairs, the Department of Peace Operations, Department of Global Communications, the UN Office for Project Services, and the United Nations Operations and Crisis Centre.

Nominated experts and analytical laboratories (per region) and their roles in support of the UNSGM

Expert consultants advise and assist in the overall conduct related to readiness and missions, from planning and deployment to operation and reporting. Their role may include the following:

- Evaluate any report made by a Member State concerning the alleged use of CBT weapons and assist the Secretary-General in conducting the investigation.
- Advise and assist the Secretary-General upon request in a consultative capacity in the various fields (legal, scientific, military, logistical and other) for the successful preparation and conduct of an investigation.
- Contribute to developing the measures required for the smooth conduct of the investigations as requested.

The roles of expert consultants are outlined in A/44/561, paragraphs 57–63.



- Africa (2 from 1 Member State)
- Asia and the Pacific (5 from 2 Member States)
- Eastern Europe (5 from 2 Member States)
- Latin American and Caribbean (3 from 1 Member State)
- Western European and Other (25 from 7 Member States)



- Africa (63 from 7 Member States)
- Asia and the Pacific (99 from 13 Member States)
- Eastern Europe (116 from 13 Member States)
- Latin American and Caribbean (33 from 5 Member States)
- Western European and Other (214 from 20 Member States)

Qualified experts may be called upon to actively participate in any investigation team to conduct investigations into the alleged use of CBT weapons as requested by the Secretary-General.

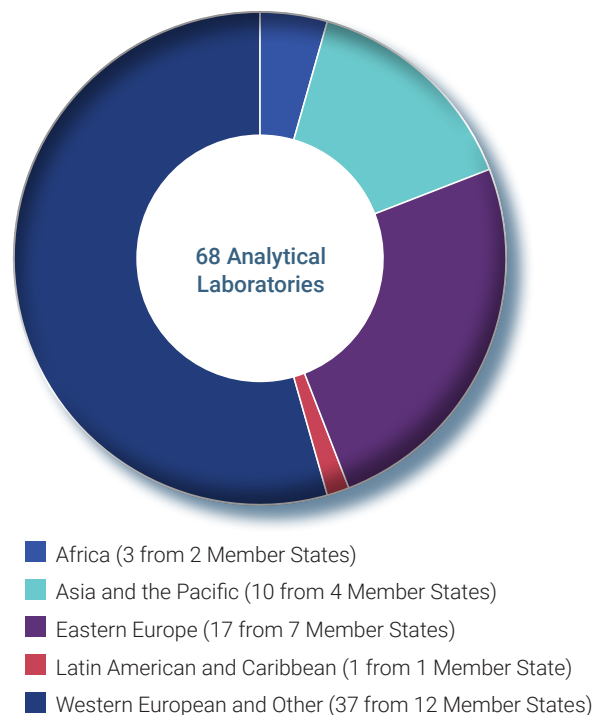
- They may observe, if possible, and take part, as appropriate, in the analysis in the designated laboratories of samples as well as acquaint themselves with the results of the analyses for use in drawing up the report of the team for the Secretary-General.
- The principal areas in which the Member States can designate qualified experts who have, where possible, acquired working experience in the field are listed in Annex IV of A/44/561, which was updated in 2007. Examples for such areas of competence include, inter alia, evaluating the effect of CBT weapons; expertise in field investigation of human, animal, and plant disease; conduct of autopsies and post-mortem sample-taking; determination of local ecological conditions; epidemiological evaluation of damage caused by CBT weapons and other types of weapons; expertise in forensics.

The roles of the qualified experts are outlined in A/44/561, paragraphs 64–75.

Analytical laboratories test for the presence of CBT agents. They may be called upon for the following:

- Carry out identification of CBT agents, their characteristic impurities, and degradation products, and munitions which may be related to the possible use of CBT weapons.
- Validate the preliminary analyses.
- Elucidate the nature of unknown CBT agents.
- Prepare and transmit a report of the details and results of their analyses to the Secretary-General.
- Participate in interlaboratory calibration studies.
- Present methodologies for sample collection, transport or analysis they may have developed that may represent an improved capability.

The role of designated analytical laboratories is outlined in A/44/561, paragraphs 76–80. Appendix V (updated in 2007) lists the principal areas in which Member States could designate laboratories.



Meeting the expert

Debbie Eagles

Deputy Director, CSIRO Australian Centre for Disease Preparedness

I joined my first UNSGM training course in Canberra, Australia in October 2016. This course was co-organized by UNODA and the Australia Departments of Defence and Foreign Affairs and Trade, and I was nominated as an Australian based attendee on behalf of the OIE (World Organisation for Animal Health). This was a baseline course, and involved attendees from Asia/Pacific, Russia and South Africa with a range of professional backgrounds. I've since been fortunate enough to also attend Command and Control training in UK, 2018 (supported by UNODA, the UK National CBRN Centre and Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and Hostile Environment Awareness Training in Germany, 2019 (supported by UNODA, Robert Koch Institute (RKI) the German Federal Foreign Office). I am now enrolled as an Australian expert and expert consultant.

The UNSGM is critical for international preparedness for response to the intentional use of biological agents ("bioweapons"). The training provided to experts and consultants over recent years has been integral to ensure that those of us outside of the UN system fully understand the UNSGM, the Guidelines and the remit should a team ever need to be deployed. In addition to broadening skills beyond our own specific areas of expertise, such as in the areas of sampling, leadership, command and control, interviewing and negotiation, the training sessions have also facilitated working relationships between potential future team members, thereby building a level of trust that will be essential in any deployment.

In November 2020, a small team of experts (myself, Jasmina Bevc of Slovenia, Fabrice Biot of France and Koffi Amegbor of Togo) were fortunate to be invited to a Table Top Exercise, to conduct pre-mission planning for a Capstone Exercise proposed for 2021. This was organized by RKI in consultation with UNODA and with support of the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), designated laboratories and expert consultants. Through an intense week the team was provided a scenario and a task to develop sampling, interviewing, equipment, logistics and command & control plan for the upcoming exercise. As a team we were extremely fortunate to be able to draw on, and receive comments from, such an experienced group of consultants and experts – useful not just for the exercise but potentially for any future deployment of the UNSGM.

Throughout my 4+ years of involvement with UNSGM to date I have gained valuable experiences – from the specific training sessions and also in learning from the other experts within those courses, as well as from expert consultants. This has been personally and professionally enriching and has also allowed me to bring back new skills and perspectives to my own workplace. What the UNSGM lacks in terms of organizational size (when compared to the OPCW), it makes up for in the dedication and passion of all those involved in ensuring that we're prepared for any future Mission.

Activities in 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on planned activities – many of the meetings and specialized skill training courses that require in-person presence had to be postponed. However, after some delay, UNODA organized several meetings that could be held virtually.

On 2 November 2020, UNODA hosted a workshop for the UNITF, in which 13 participants from eight different UN Offices discussed the UNSGM mandate and roles with a focus on mission planning.

On 3-4 November 2020, UNODA hosted a workshop and table-top exercise for 13 expert consultants from six Member States – again a heartfelt thank you to all those who participated across many time zones!

The Robert Koch Institute (Germany), in coordination with UNODA and supported by Sweden, hosted a virtual table-top exercise from 9–13 November 2020. Over a period of five days, a team of qualified experts (monitored by observers) developed a mission plan for a fictitious UNSGM

investigation. Despite challenges related to time zones, more than 50 participants joined each day. This table-top exercise was the first step of the large-scale field exercise that was postponed to June 2021.

Exercises and workshops that focus on skills training to strengthen the UNSGM's operability must be held as face-to-face events. Three such activities had been planned for 2020, and all had to be postponed. Germany and Sweden postponed the above-mentioned capstone field exercise that was initially planned for September 2020 to June 2021.

Two other skills training workshops offered by Australia and South Africa, respectively, have been postponed to 2021 without a definitive date. Similarly, UNODA outreach activities for Latin America and Africa had to be postponed.

The RefBio external quality assurance exercise, developed and conducted by the Robert Koch Institute, was implemented in 2017 and this year focused on coronavirus, with more than 30 participants from 19 countries.

Planned activities in 2021

The capstone field exercise organized by Germany is now scheduled for about two weeks in June 2021 in Berlin. The focus of this exercise is an on-site investigation of the alleged use of a biological weapon in a (fictitious) country, and it will cover several of the main aspects of a UNSGM investigation, including mission-planning, organizing supplies and equipment, border crossing and negotiation with the host country, interviewing, sampling, decontamination, chain of custody and sample transport.

Switzerland had postponed the sixth annual UNSGM Designated Laboratories Workshop because of the pandemic. This workshop is now planned for 15–17 September 2021 in Spiez.

The external quality assessment exercises (EQAE) organized by Germany are expected to continue in 2021 with EQAE on viruses, bacteria and biological toxins.

In addition, the Robert Koch Institute will start a two-year EQAE for the analysis and interpretation of DNA sequence data related to detection and characterization of viral pathogens. The project will begin in January with a dry-lab exercise and a workshop to discuss the results of the exercise is planned for June 2021.

As COVID-19 will continue to impact our ability to hold in-person meetings, UNODA is working on additional virtual outreach and table-top exercises. Depending on changes to the travel situation, we plan to resume these activities as face-to-face meetings in the second half of 2021, including the UNODA outreach activities for Latin America and Africa.

Supporting the UNSGM

UNODA's work to ensure the readiness of the UNSGM is made possible by generous financial support and in-kind contributions, such as the provision of training material and hosting events, from Member States. We are especially grateful for the support from Canada, Germany, Japan, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union. We also appreciate the support from our international partner organizations, including the WHO, INTERPOL, OPCW, and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE). This voluntary support from Member States and organizations is a cornerstone for ensuring and improving operational readiness of the UNSGM.

Thank you for your interest in our first newsletter. We plan to send this newsletter twice a year and we would welcome your contributions to future editions.

Contact us

Questions, concerns, suggestions? Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions regarding supporting the UNSGM or if you are interested in participating in activities.

We would love to hear from you! Please contact us here:



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