

Chemical and biological weapons conventions

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993, which entered into force in 1997, prohibits the development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons. It is implemented by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague, whose inspectors visit military facilities as well as civilian chemical plants that produce or process scheduled chemicals. The Convention distinguishes three schedules of chemicals according to their risk and their legitimate uses. Companies that produce, process or consume these chemicals above certain thresholds must declare them and may be subject to on-site inspections. In Switzerland, the Chemicals Control Ordinance implements these obligations, with SECO acting as the national authority responsible for declarations and for accompanying inspections.¹

For the chemical industry of the region, these inspections are a routine part of operations. They require precise records of the quantities of scheduled chemicals and an organisation that can receive inspectors at short notice. The Spiez Laboratory, which belongs to the Federal Office for Civil Protection, is one of the laboratories designated by the OPCW for the analysis of samples. It has played a role in the investigation of several chemical weapons attacks, including the analysis of samples connected with the Salisbury poisoning of 2018 and with the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Switzerland thus contributes to the verification regime through scientific expertise that has close links to the chemical tradition of the country.²

The Biological Weapons Convention of 1972 has no comparable verification body. It prohibits the development, production and stockpiling of biological and toxin weapons, but its implementation relies on confidence-building measures and on national legislation. In Switzerland, work with pathogens is regulated by the Containment Ordinance and the Release Ordinance, while the export of agents and equipment is subject to

the Goods Control Ordinance. The rapid development of biotechnology, including synthetic biology and gene editing, has intensified the debate on biosecurity. Companies and research institutions in Basel work with screening procedures for orders of synthetic DNA and with internal rules on research of concern.³

1 Notes

1. Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction of 13 January 1993 (SR 0.515.08), in force since 29 April 1997; Chemicals Control Ordinance of 21 August 2013 (CCO/ChKV, SR 946.202.21). To be verified. ↩
2. On the Spiez Laboratory as an OPCW designated laboratory and its analytical work, see the website of the Federal Office for Civil Protection and the reports of the OPCW. On its role in the Salisbury case, see the OPCW's report of April 2018, which did not name the participating laboratories, and subsequent public statements. To be verified. ↩
3. Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction of 10 April 1972 (SR 0.515.07), ratified by Switzerland in 1976; Ordinance on Handling Organisms in Contained Systems (Containment Ordinance, ContainO/ESV, SR 814.912). To be verified. ↩

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