

Pre-Deployment Orientation for the United Nations’ Secretary- General’s Mechanism for Investigation of Alleged Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons (UNSGM) Missions: Workshop Report

Contents

Introduction	2
Workshop Discussion	3
Conclusion & Acknowledgements	6

Introduction

From March 19th-21st, the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) and the Verification Research, Training and Information Centre (VERTIC) co-hosted a workshop on the United Nations' Secretary-General's Mechanism for Investigation of Alleged Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons (UNSGM). The workshop took place at the UN Headquarters in New York and was generously funded by the European Union and the Governments of Canada and the United States.

The UNSGM is the only international mechanism to investigate alleged uses of biological weapons. The mechanism was established by UN General Assembly resolution A/42/37C¹ and reaffirmed by Security Council Resolution 620 (1988)². It requests the Secretary-General to investigate reports of alleged chemical, biological or toxin weapon use brought forward by any Member State and report findings back to all Member States. Its mandate is limited to determining whether an incident was due to deliberate use of biological weapons or not. The mandate does not extend to, e.g., supporting a public health response or provision of aid. It is not linked to the Biological Weapons Convention, but explicitly upholds the 1925 Geneva Protocol and customary international law.

The workshop's objective was to identify needs and priorities for pre-deployment orientation for a UNSGM mission, with a specific focus on investigations of alleged use of biological weapons. The UNSGM is not a standing mechanism but can be activated by the Secretary-General upon requests from any UN Member States. As the custodian of the mechanism, UNODA maintains a roster of nationally nominated 'qualified experts' who may be drawn upon for the mission team if the UNSGM is activated. To ensure readiness, qualified experts undergo additional training following their nomination³; in this context, pre-deployment orientation is meant to brief team members on the details and goals of the mission, provide refreshers on, among other things, the UNSGM mandate, field operations and equipment, and ensure that the experts can operate together as part of a UN mission team.

According to the UNSGM Guidelines and Procedures⁴, the qualified experts called upon from the roster are to be deployed to the site of investigation within days after the submission of a request by a Member State to the UN Secretary-General for investigation if possible. However, as was the case for the 2013 UNSGM mission in the

¹ 'Measures to uphold the authority of the 1925 Geneva Protocol and to support the conclusion of a Chemical Weapons Convention'. *UN General Assembly 84th Plenary Meeting, A/42/37 C* (30 Nov 1987). Available at <https://undocs.org/a/res/42/37>.

² 'Resolution 620 (1988)'. *UN Security Council 2825th Meeting* (26 August 1988). Available at [https://undocs.org/s/res/620\(1988\)](https://undocs.org/s/res/620(1988)).

³ More information can be found on the UNSGM website at <https://disarmament.unoda.org/wmd/sgm-training-activities/>

⁴ 'Report of the group of qualified experts established in pursuance of General Assembly resolution 42/37 C'. *A/44/561*, 4 Oct 1989. Available at <https://undocs.org/a/44/561>.

Syrian Arab Republic, teams may be assembled and waiting at pre-staging areas for a longer period of time, potentially up to several weeks, due to the need to conclude an agreement with the host state(s) or for other reasons. Considering the range of possible timelines for pre-deployment, workshop participants were asked to consider both the minimum requirements for orientation, as well as additional preparatory activities in case of additional time before deployment to the field.

The workshop was attended by a select group of expert consultants nominated to the UNSGM roster (whose role includes, inter alia, advising the United Nations on training of qualified experts for investigations upon request), representatives from relevant UN offices and departments, and other experts with a high level of practical experience in field investigations. Participants worked in groups to discuss operational needs, elements of a pre-deployment orientation curriculum, and existing resources within the UN system and beyond. UNODA and VERTIC facilitated the dialogue, with VERTIC also serving as rapporteur and consolidating the proposals in a report.

Workshop Discussion

The UN Internal Task Force (UNITF) was implemented based on recommendations from the 2014-2015 lessons learned exercise on the investigation in the Syrian Arab Republic⁵ and is coordinated by the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA); the other members include the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs-Department of Peace Operations (UNDPPA-DPO), UN Department of Operational Support (UNDOS), UN Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS), Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General (EOSG), UN Office of Legal Affairs (UNOLA), UN Operations and Crisis Center (UNOCC), and UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS). The UNITF is likely to be convened to prepare for and support a UNSGM investigation.

A fielded team would, depending on the context of the mission, likely be supported by UN staff. Possible functions of these staff are likely to include security and logistical support, as well as facilitating interoperability between the mission and the UN system. Under the UNSGM Guidelines and Procedures, the Member State (also referred to throughout the workshop as the 'host state') receiving an investigation is expected to assure the security of the mission team, provide transportation, and allow unhindered passage across their border, provide a secure work area⁶, and allow access to victims of the incident. The host state may request aliquots of samples taken and appoint an observer to accompany the team, which would need to be communicated to the team in advance to facilitate mission planning.

⁵ UNODA, 'The Secretary-General's Mechanism for Investigation of Alleged Use of Chemical, Bacteriological (Biological) or Toxin Weapons: A lessons-learned exercise for the United Nations Mission in the Syrian Arab Republic'. *United Nations*, New York, May 2015.

⁶ In case the host country is not in a position to assure security, provide transportation or a secure work area, this can be provided by the UN.

Timelines for pre-deployment orientation

As noted previously, the length of time available for pre-deployment orientation from when the team is assembled at a staging area until they begin the investigation on the ground could vary from within 72 hours to a few months. According to the Guidelines and Procedures, paragraph 32, the Secretary-General should decide whether to investigate ‘no later than 24 hours after’ a Member State submits a report of alleged use, ‘if possible’. It further adds that qualified experts ‘should be dispatched to the site of the alleged incident...no later than 48 hours after the decision...if possible’. This timeline is captured in Figure 1 below.

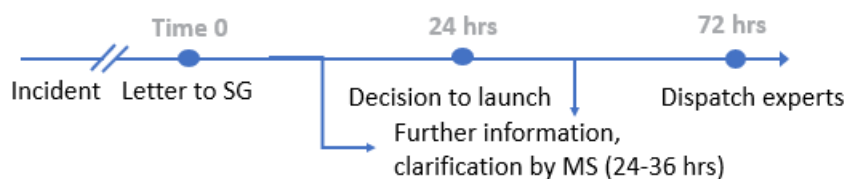


Figure 1. Timeline ‘if possible’ according to A/44/561 paragraph 32 b-c.⁷

However, participants frequently indicated that dispatching an investigation team to the field within 72 hours is a goal which would be considered unlikely due to the time required to complete some key preparatory steps. These would include negotiation of terms of reference of the mission, including access for the team, with the host state, coordination of visas, logistics, and possibly communication with expert consultants and analytical laboratories. Some of the selected experts may not have participated in the standardized UNSGM basic training or the mandatory SSAFE⁸ training and in this case, additional time must be budgeted for their onboarding and the mandatory training.

As such, participants were asked to differentiate among the range of timeframes when identifying needs; they settled upon a matrix proposed by VERTIC and improved by participants from the UNITF as a framework. The improved matrix⁹ was designed with the intention of front-loading as much preparatory work as possible. To this end, it is divided into phases: standing preparatory measures (no investigation requested), pre-deployment (following the decision by the Secretary-General to launch an investigation), deployment (investigation in the field), and post-mission. The pre-deployment phase is further divided into preparation at UN Headquarters and pre-deployment orientation for the mission team at the assembly point.

⁷ UNODA, ‘Secretary-General’s Mechanism for Investigation of Alleged Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons (UNSGM)’. *UNSGM Workshop on Pre-Deployment*, presentation delivered 19 March 2024.

⁸ Safe and Secure Approaches in Field Environments, a custom-tailored course developed by the UN Department for Safety and Security in coordination with the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs.

⁹ The group decided that the matrix, including recommendations be given to UNODA for further refinement and implementation instead of being made publicly available.

Key training and orientation needs

Before any investigation has been requested and upon nomination to the roster (rostering phase), qualified experts are offered a brief virtual orientation by UNODA and are encouraged to take online trainings such as BSAFE (a brief personal safety and security course). To be eligible for field deployment they have to undergo in-person SSAFE training, which is facilitated by UNDSS and provides a comprehensive training on personal safety and security in field environments, including first aid training. Ideally, all rostered experts will have participated in the standardized two-week basic training course. In addition to these activities, participants recommended the creation and provision of information booklets on UN procedures and UNSGM-specific procedures and protocols. It was also suggested that the UN's Civilian Pre-Deployment Training¹⁰ could be abbreviated and tailored for delivery to UNSGM qualified experts.

Following a decision to investigate by the Secretary-General, the pre-deployment phase would commence. Preparation at UN Headquarters could include preparation of a mission plan, security risk assessment, collation of information about the incident, possibly briefing expert consultants and laboratories, selecting support staff, public communications, sample transport arrangements, templates for report writing, an organogram or role cards for the team, and pre-deployment briefings.

The pre-deployment orientation itself should entail briefing the team on the specific UNSGM mission mandate, general context of the incident, and guidance on the flow of information. Additionally, it would facilitate team introductions and definition of roles and responsibilities. The participants further recommended inclusion of team-building activities throughout the orientation.

If the team has only a few days to prepare before deployment to the site for investigation, pre-deployment orientation will be limited to briefings and short refreshers. If more time is available than the 48 hours indicated in the Guidelines & Procedures, this additional time can be utilized for drills of processes to facilitate a smooth investigative process.

Participants also noted that plans of activities for the pre-deployment phase should include welfare and stress management. In case of a very long wait before deployment (such as for the Syria mission), the experience of preparing and waiting for an extended period can itself take a toll on team members' mental health. In addition, plans for addressing mental health during and after the mission need to be communicated to the team.

¹⁰ <https://peacekeepingresourcehub.un.org/en/training/pre-deployment>

Conclusion & Acknowledgements

The workshop yielded clear recommendations for strengthening the Mechanism and preparing rostered experts for on-site investigation immediately before a mission and further highlighted existing resources that could support pre-deployment orientation.

We would like to thank the European Union and the Governments of Canada and the United States for their financial support of this workshop. Additionally, we thank the participants for their productive discussion and enthusiastic engagement with efforts to ensure the readiness of the UNSGM.