U.S. and Others Conduct Training to Detect and Respond to WMD Attacks

During the week of 4 October 2020, the United States and allies organized a virtual training for scientists, security officials, and first responders on detection and response to incidents involving the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that is suspected as a means of assassination, reports the U.S. Department of States.

The report points out that training on WMD-use prevention practices, detection techniques, and accountability measures is the first of a series of U.S.-sponsored bilateral and multilateral initiatives that provide an opportunity for key international partners to work together in addressing an emerging and complex global security challenge.

The initiative is an essential countermeasure because the use of these weapons by terrorists or other hostile powers is a real threat to international peace and security. WMDs can indiscriminately inflict death and destruction on a massive scale. To that end, international actors must work together as a global community to prevent and respond to these attacks as an international security priority.

The report highlights recent cases of international concern. The report argues, for instance, that:

Russia has a particularly notorious history of using WMD to target adversaries for assassination. This includes attempts to assassinate opposition politicians in Russia, dissidents and defectors abroad, and even citizens of other countries whose actions Russia disagrees with. The assassination attempt against Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, U.K. in 2018 was particularly notable, because it involved the first known use
of a Novichok nerve agent that the Soviet Union developed in secret. And the Skripal incident is not unique. Just last month, according to chemical analysis by Germany, France, and Sweden, which was confirmed by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, a Novichok agent was also used in the assassination attempt of Russian opposition leader Aleksey Navalny. Addressing such threats are a significant international security priority.

The use of WMDs as a tool of assassination is a violation of international law. Indeed, the Chemical Weapons Convention bans the use of chemical weapons, including the Novichok agent. Furthermore, its use can even affect non-targeted individuals who get exposed to the substance. In this context, the report emphasizes that “the United States is committed to helping our partners worldwide counter Russian malign activities and looking forward to working with them to help recognize, attribute, and respond effectively to incidents using WMD as a tool of assassination is suspected.”