



DISARMAMENT:

Biology, a Science of Life - and Death

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Canada has had difficult experiences with disease in the past few years, like outbreaks of "mad cow disease" (BSE) and avian flu, that affected agriculture, or exposure to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which raised awareness regarding the dangers of "human pathogens".

GENEVA, Dec 7 (IPS) - "In our globalised world, health incidents that appear to be remote one day can, very quickly, become a major international threat the next," warned a Canadian government delegation in Geneva that, however, said it was fortunate that "none of the biological issues...were caused deliberately."

Nevertheless, the risk is latent -- something that is understood by the 152 party states to the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) and 16 signatories that have not yet ratified the treaty, which are holding their second annual meeting this week in Geneva.

One of the main issues under debate is the strengthening and broadening of national and international efforts and mechanisms for the surveillance, detection, diagnosis and combating of infectious diseases that affect human beings, animals and plants.

The other question being discussed is the "enhancing of international capabilities for responding to, investigating and mitigating the effects of cases of alleged use of biological or toxin weapons or suspicious outbreaks of disease."

Many governments, organisations of scientists, and peace groups closely follow these issues, due to evidence of biological weapons programmes in certain countries, and because the BWC is not as strong as it could be.

Biological weapons were used in the Stone Age, when enemies threw animal feces at each other, and during the colonial period, when the British gave the shrouds from soldiers who had died from smallpox to hostile tribal groups in India.

In more recent times, the world's powerful nations, like the former Soviet Union, and other countries like Iraq have had programmes to develop biological weapons.

The BWC was created in 1972 to prohibit the development, production, stockpiling and sale of bacteriological (biological) weapons. In 1996, the ban was extended to the use of such weapons (although the Geneva Protocol of 1925 already prohibited the use of both poison gas and bacteriological methods in warfare).

But the BWC lacks a verification regime to determine whether state parties are complying with the provisions of the Convention.

The last attempt to create monitoring measures failed in 2001, when the United States blocked approval of a draft protocol, on the argument that inspections would reveal strategic and sensitive defence or pharmaceutical and biotechnology information.

But many countries have continued to insist on the need for a monitoring system. India said Monday that "It is the lack of a mechanism for verification of compliance that diminishes the Convention's effectiveness."

The delegation from India also brought up an issue that is important to developing countries: the demand for increased international cooperation in the transfer and exchange of biological materials and technologies for peaceful purposes.

With respect to monitoring, the prevailing view has been that in the United States, the government and the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries form a solid alliance against a verification regime, on the argument that the BWC is "unverifiable" due to the complex, dual-use nature of biological materials, equipment, and technologies.

But in a consultation process carried out by the conservative Washington, D.C.-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies, leading experts in the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries agreed that a verification system is indeed possible.

Although the industry veterans concurred with the U.S. government that the draft monitoring protocol that Washington rejected in July 2001 was flawed, "that does not mean that it cannot be fixed," said the CSIS report.

The industry experts also pointed to the disparity between U.S. warnings of the threat posed by biological weapons and the country's failure to take action to confront the problem.

The CSIS report said that gap is not only "hypocritical" and disconcerting, but also irresponsible.

"If the U.S. industry were to abandon the search for a cure for cancer, Alzheimer's, or any other diseases, a public uproar would occur," says the report. "Yet, the dissolution of the international process to strengthen the BWC has gone virtually without notice."

But threats against humans are not the only risks posed by biological weapons. Expert Jean Pascal Zanders warned that the problem is more complex, because biological warfare can target animals and plants as well.

The aim of such efforts would be to cause economic and social collapse without directly claiming human lives, said Zanders, director of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP), which links a number of peace groups.

Another BWPP concern is the possibility of the use of scientific and technological advances for hostile purposes, such as the misuse of diseases as weapons of war.

Science and technology are progressing rapidly, and it is easy for an individual, group or state to acquire such technology and misuse it, said Zanders, who mentioned the case of biological agents in the hands of terrorists.

It is frequently stated that biological agents are capable of killing thousands, tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of people, which is true in theory, said Zanders. But, he underlined, great damage can be caused to agriculture as well. (END/2004)

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