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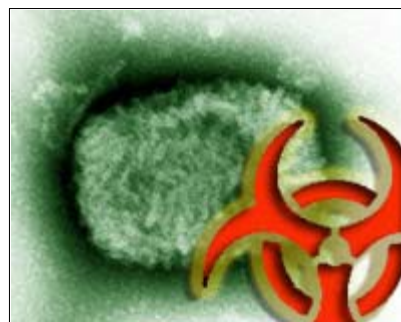
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Thirty years on - the ban on biological weapons

by RN Security and Defence editor Hans de Vreij, 26 March 2005

Thirty years ago, for the first time in history, an entire category of weapons of mass destruction was banned. On 26 March 1975, the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention entered into force, ushering in an official prohibition on the use of these weapons. Now, three decades later, these weapons are in the news again because of their possible use by terrorists, while the treaty itself continues to reflect the Cold War era in which it was born.



At the time of its creation, the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) was unique, not only because it banned the use of an entire category of weapons of mass destruction, but also the production and possession of such weapons. However, it had a significant weak spot in that no agreement was reached on a suitable verification regime, that is, a system of inspections to monitor compliance by the parties to the convention.

The espionage factor

This 'flaw' in the convention is still an issue. Indeed, why is there a verification regime for the treaty banning chemical weapons, concluded in the 1990s, but not in the case of biological weapons? The best-publicised objection to such a regime has come particularly from big business in the United States. Companies involved in the development of, for example, new vaccines against common diseases are fearful of UN inspections being used as a cloak for industrial espionage. The amounts of money invested in the biotech industry reach into billions of dollars; the resulting patents are often worth much, much more.

However, the crucial need for the convention to have a sound inspection system has been more than demonstrated by what happened in the former Soviet Union after the treaty came into effect.



Soviet programme

Dr Jean Pascal Zanders, Belgian head of the Geneva-based 'BioWeapons Prevention Project', says that after the treaty had been signed, the Soviet Union started out on a massive programme to produce new biological weapons:

"They were mainly interested in new biotechnological developments in the field of genetic modification. They were looking for pathogens which existing vaccines, antibiotics and other medicines would not be able to stop."

Dr Zanders adds:

"There was also a massive increase in production. For example, we now know that the Soviet Union had a stockpile of 20 tonnes of the smallpox virus, ready to be loaded onto intercontinental missiles for use after a nuclear attack."

Current stockpiles

According to cautious estimates, at present more than ten countries have biological weapons which they could deploy. Some of these states are signatories to the convention, others are not. However, the main focus of current concern is terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda, which are believed to want to spread diseases such as smallpox and the Ebola virus: the ultimate in terrorist weapons.

Difficult to make

Where this particular fear is concerned, Dr Zanders is something of an exception among his fellow experts. Unlike many others, he does not believe the likelihood of terrorists using such weapons in the near future is very large.

"It is fairly difficult to produce the most advanced kind of bacteriological weapons, or to do so in sufficient quantities. It requires a great deal of technology and organisation. You can't just make these weapons in the bathroom or kitchen."

Next year, the 150 signatories to the convention are to attend a 'review' conference, and lobbying has already started for the introduction of a rigorous inspection regime.

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