
Biological weapons

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Background

Biological weapons, also referred to as bioweapons, are dangerous pathogens—bacteria, viruses, or toxins—that are combined with a delivery mechanism to inflict harm. Biological weapons can be disseminated through inhalation, ingestion, or skin absorption.

Biological weapons are prohibited under international law. The Geneva Protocol (1925) and the Biological and Toxins Weapons Convention (BWC) ban any biological agents or toxins of any type or quantity that do not have protective, medical, or other peaceful purposes, and any weapons or means of delivery for such agents or toxins. The BWC does not have a verification mechanism for monitoring global sources of dangerous pathogens but it has politically binding confidence-building measures (CBMs), and a number of states parties have recently piloted peer reviews on a voluntary basis. It has 181 states parties and six signatory states.

Contemporary concerns about biological weapons do not simply involve possession of “weapons”. Instead, concerns primarily involve the degree to which states have the capacity and intent to threaten or perpetrate a biological attack, which is particularly relevant when it comes to countries’ biodefence programmes.¹ The global network of science academics recently concluded that

technological barriers to acquiring and using bioweapons have been significantly eroded over the last years.³

Current context

International efforts are still to find an effective way to balance the benefits of modern biotechnology with their potential for misuse. In the UN Secretary-General’s 2018 Agenda for Disarmament he maintains that the BWC is “institutionally weak when compared to similar regimes, national implementation is uneven and it contains no operational capacity to respond to biological attacks or provisions to verify compliance with the Convention.”⁴

At the 2017 UN General Assembly, many references to biological weapons centred on the quality of the outcome from the Eighth Review Conference of the BWC held in 2016, where division between states prevented agreement on a substantive outcome document. Some countries reflected their positions in the context of this divide during their First Committee statements, and many states parties regretted that the document was not stronger and did not make progress, despite considerable preparation in the lead-up. States spoke repeatedly about how they had accepted a watered-down outcome document at the last BWC review conference in the name of consensus.⁵

In 2017, the First Committee resolution “Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction” was adopted without a vote. Compared to the 2016 resolution, it incorporated new paragraphs to reflect decisions taken at the Eighth Review Conference, including a Meeting of States Parties in December 2017.

While the Chair was not confirmed until September 2017, resulting in limited preparation time for this meeting, the December 2017 meeting managed to agree on a new work programme for the intersessional period leading up to the Ninth Review Conference in 2021. The recently concluded Meetings of Experts to the BWC in August 2018 demonstrated general agreement on the urgent need to strengthen the Convention in light of rapid biological and technological developments. Yet, divergent views on how the BWC is to be bolstered have hindered any real progress so far. Against this backdrop, it is important that BWC’s states parties collectively reinvigorate the Convention as the main forum for managing security risks of biology in the 21st century.⁶

- Report on measures taken to implement provisions from the Convention; and
- Constructively discuss the Secretary-General’s proposal to establish a core standing coordinating capacity within the UN for investigating use, and the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs’ efforts to develop a framework for coordinated response.

Beyond First Committee, states should:

- Review national measures and policies and make changes or implement new ones to strengthen compliance with the BWC;
- Identify relevant scientific and technological developments, consider their implications, and their potential bearings on the Convention, and formulate individual and collective action to address possible challenges;
- Establish a dedicated technical body such as a technical open-ended working group under the BWC and an International Biosecurity Advisory Board; and
- Pay any outstanding assessed contributions in full, and pledge financial support for the implementation of the BWC.

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Recommendations

During First Committee, delegations should:

- Reaffirm and strengthen their commitment to the BWC;

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- 1 Filippa Lentzos and Jez Littlewood, “DARPA’s Prepare program: Preparing for what?” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 26 July 2018, <https://thebulletin.org/2018/07/darpas-prepare-program-preparing-for-what>.
 - 2 “The Biological and Toxin Weapon Trends Symposium,” IAP Global Network of Science Academies conference, 13–15 September 2015.
 - 3 *Securing our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament*, UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, 24 May 2018.
 - 4 See for example Allison Pytlak, “Biological and chemical weapons,” *First Committee Monitor* 2017, No. 3, Reaching Critical Will of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 15 October 2017.
 - 5 Filippa Lentzos, “Strengthen the taboo against biological and chemical weapons,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, 26 July 2018, <https://thebulletin.org/2018/07/strengthen-the-taboo-against-biological-and-chemical-weapons>.