

**Forum:** General Assembly: First Committee

**Issue #G1-02:** Regulating biological warfare, bioterrorism, and biodefense

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## Introduction

Biological weapons are made of living microorganisms. They can be unpredictable and incredibly dangerous, especially when created inside a laboratory. Biological weapons are also a lot cheaper to create in comparison to missiles and bombs, and the biological agents released as weapons can stay undetected for hours, which makes them attractive for terrorist use.

Biological warfare, bioterrorism, and biodefense are all terms that revolve around the use of biological weapons. There are thousands of different ways of releasing biological weapons into a country to, for example, create mass terror and disrupt a government (which would fall under the category of bioterrorism) or to disrupt a nation's army (classified as biological warfare). Many countries have goals to minimize their vulnerability to biological weapons and to solidify their biodefense to reduce their susceptibility to biological warfare and/or biological terrorism.

The current concern is directed at the protocol put in place in the Biological and Toxin weapons convention (BTWC) to identify a violation of the convention. Many member states have shown their concern over the lack of security created by the convention's protocol to verify countries' compliance with the convention. An additional issue is that even if no countries have weaponized biological agents, there are still very easy to create under the radar as a civilian, which has happened on many occasions with bioterrorism.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Biological warfare

The use of biological agents, such as viruses and bacteria, as weapons, in attempts to incapacitate or hurt humans or animals as an act of war.

### Bioterrorism

The release of biological agents, such as viruses and/or bacteria, to harm or kill animals, plants, and/or humans. Unlike biological warfare, bioterrorism is not necessarily looking to hurt the largest number of people. The goal is to cause the biggest form of social impact possible, usually to disrupt the stability of a nation's government.

### Biodefense

The attempts to defend or restore the security of a group of individuals, either non-combatant civilians or active military personnel, from a biological threat. (Powell & Future science group, 2018).

### Biological weapon

“Microorganisms like virus, bacteria, fungi, or other toxins that are produced and released deliberately to cause disease and death in humans, animals or plants.” (WHO/S.G.Amatya, N/D).

## Issue Overview

There is a convention, signed in 1972 and put in motion in 1975, that was made to overview the existence of biological weapons, called the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC). The convention, with 183 countries as parties to the committee, does not have “effective” laws to corroborate that member states comply with the convention. But, as an alternative, as stated in Article VI of the BTWC: *“Any State Party to this Convention which finds that any other State Party is acting in breach of obligations deriving from the provisions of the Convention may lodge a complaint with the Security Council of the United Nations.”* (WHO, 1972). Many member states have argued over the years that this protocol that was put in order to detect nations that

do not comply with the convention is not effective enough to protect states from Biowarfare agents.

## Historical Background

### *Prior to the 21st century*

There are hundreds of writings from Ancient Greek literature that show that Scythian Archers used to use microorganisms from decaying bodies to harm people and cause a delayed effect with the infection.

As former director of the U.S. Air Force Counterproliferation Center argued, revisionist historians have argued that boats that arrived at the Italian coasts in 1347 were packed with Plague infested bodies coming from Ukrainian territory, beginning the Black Death pandemic. (Schneider, 2017)

In 1767, the British gave native Americans blankets contaminated with the smallpox virus. Famous history writer stated that the natives wouldn't leave Fort Pitt, so they made an agreement with the British: they would leave in exchange for liquor and provisions, and the British decided to "gift" them blankets as well. (Kiger, 2019)

### *World War 1*

During this period, the Germans infected Argentinian livestock with a biological agent called anthrax, and they were later shipped to the Allies.

### *World War 2*

When WW2 started, the Japanese had developed many different biological agents, such as but not limited to anthrax, cholera, dysentery, and typhoid.

The British tested anthrax bombs and had prepared and stockpiled anthrax-laced cattle cakes as a form of biodefense in case Germany decided to use biological warfare. The US also, for the same reason, had accumulated quantities of botulinum toxin and anthrax.

British military officials also formulated a plan called *Operation Vegetarian* which, if carried out, would have resulted in the death of millions of Germans. The plan was to make seed-based cakes infected with anthrax and distribute them across German fields, which would then be eaten by cattle and infect humans. The operation was ready to be carried out but got canceled by Winston Churchill once Normandy was invaded, and all anthrax cakes got destroyed at the end of WW2.

Even though there is no evidence of other use of Biological weapons during this period of time, we do know that many nations, such as Canada, France, Italy, and the USSR, were doing plenty of research on different organisms, the most common being anthrax.

We also know that the US dismissed charges of war crimes during WW2 to Japanese leading members of the biological weapons program in exchange for information and data on the experiments they had performed on human subjects with some bioorganism. Unit 731 was an undercover program by the Japanese army that specialized in testing biological weapons on live human subjects (war prisoners). This unit was set in Manchukuo, China, which was occupied by Japanese forces at the moment. (Cunliffe, n.d., 8-9)

### *The Cold War*

Throughout the course of the Vietnam War, the Viet Cong used fecal matter as a biological weapon, as they dipped their weapons' points in it, and it would infect the enemy with diseases.

In 1972, the British, supported by the Americans, developed a proposal where countries would have to identify their facilities and all adjacent activities with bioweapons, and they would have to undergo inspections of these facilities by an international agency to make sure they were entertaining lawful activities. On April 10th, 1972, it was put up for signature, and by April 26th, 1975, once they had gathered 104 signatures and 22 ratification documents, the BTWC became effective.

In 1984, followers of spiritual leader Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh poisoned food at restaurants in Oregon, USA, and gave around 800 customers salmonella.

In 1992, the USSR's biological warfare program was discovered, and, by the time it was discovered, the program was already 70 years old. In itself, this program disregarded directly the USSR's signature and ratification to the BTWC. The reason why they were able to pass undetected since the signing of the BTWC was the "*lack of a verification regime to check members' compliance with the BTWC*" (Schneider, 2017). It is speculated that the Russian government may have continued this program after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

## Latest Events

### *Covid 19*

Most recent events include the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic and the hypothesis on its origin story. It is speculated that the SARS-CoV2 virus was bioengineered in the Wuhan institute of virology, and somehow managed to escape, causing the Coronavirus pandemic, which has been responsible for over 5.4 million deaths since January 6th, 2020, according to the World Health Organisation. (WHO, 2022)

Even if we do not believe that the Covid-19 outbreak was purposely caused, the pandemic will most likely inspire future bioterrorist attacks. The SARS-CoV2 virus is proof of the enormous damage that a pathogen can cause to the global population. The virus spreads rapidly and constantly evolves, making it very difficult to find a cure or vaccines to prevent further infections or deaths. This causes enormous risks to the future of the world. Weaponizing a pathogen is not nearly as hard as it seems, especially nowadays with all the technology and information within arm's reach, so this might originate a spike in bioterrorism.

### *Biosecurity and biodefense*

In December of 2021, the US House of Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation held a panel on *Biosecurity for the Future: Strengthening Deterrence and Detection*, where they urged government officials and leaders to research urgent plans to "*prevent future catastrophic biological events*" (Global Defense, 2021). Although the US' concerns about biosecurity are very controversial, as they have, for instance, saved stocks of the smallpox virus (Variola). A lot of people have spoken out on the insecurity this causes, seeing as its sole existence

presents a lot of risks. If the virus somehow gets out, it could cause a tragedy, one that could have been prevented if the virus was destroyed.

### *Alleged violations to the BTWC*

No country in the world has openly stated that they possess weaponized biological pathogens, but there is a lot of mistrust between nations, which is what eventually caused the American invasion of Iraq in 2003.

For years there have been conjectures about China still having an active Biological Weapons Program. Most nations are fairly certain that they do, but their hypothesis is solely based on speculations, and on China's attitude regarding the BTWC. Nobody has any proof yet, a result of the secrecy of the Chinese government.

Like China, North Korea is presumed to have the largest biological weapons program in the world, but there is no proof for the existence of this program nor for their possession of any biological weapon. Russia is also presumed to still have its Biological Weapon Program running; and, although there is no proof, speculations are taken more seriously since the USSR managed to secretly run their biological weapons program for 70 years.

## Major Parties Involved

### USA

The United States, like many other countries during the 1940s, founded the Offensive Biological Weapons Development and Production Program under Roosevelt's presidency. During this time, there was a situation resembling a biological warfare race to research and produce the best biological weapons (although this was not a very public matter). For the US in particular, it was anthrax that caught their attention. At a point during WW2, the US had stockpiled 5,000 anthrax bombs to "use in defense of a German attack". On April 10th, 1972, US president Nixon presented the US' ratification document to the BTWC, and, prior to this, he ceased operations on the Offensive Biological Weapons Development and Production Program. Since then, the US government has stated that "weaponization of biological agents and toxins is unacceptable". The US government is "determined to strengthen and revitalize the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC)". (Sullivan, 2021)

## Russia

Previously, the USSR had been researching Biological weapons since at least 1920, which is when it is speculated that their biological weapons program was started. While the Soviet Union ratified the BTWC, the USSR's biological warfare program was testing and developing biological pathogens and weaponizing them- a direct violation of the convention. It lasted until 1991, as it was ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, although there are speculations that the Russian Federation took over the program.

## UK

The United Kingdom (UK), like the US, was involved in biological weapons research during World War 2. The UK had an offensive biological program that was shut down in 1956 because researchers came to the conclusion that biowarfare had no strategic or military purpose compared to their nuclear power. Since then, they've continued to research the field of biodefense and biosecurity, but reportedly abstain from engaging with any kind of biological weapon. In 1968, the UK proposed a ban on all biological weapons, which later evolved to the Biological and Toxins Weapons Convention. In more recent news, on March 2021, the ministry of defense of the UK communicated that "Chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) weapon use remains an enduring and growing threat to the UK, deployed forces and international stability." (Secretary of State for Defence, 2021, 23)

## Japan

In 1935, the Japanese Imperial Army formed the Epidemic Prevention and Water Purification Department of the Kwantung Army. Unit 731 was a secret sub-division of this department specialized in chemical and biological investigations on live human subjects. It was part of the Japanese Imperial Army's Biological Warfare Program, and it was largely supported by the Japanese government until the end of WW2. The Unit was shut down after the war, and so was Operation Cherry Blossom, which was supposed to initially infect the people of San Francisco on September 22, 1945, and ultimately start biological warfare. Later, on April 10, 1972, Japan ratified the BTWC. Nowadays, Japan has contributed to the BTWC and has helped fund workshops on biosecurity and biodefense.

## Timeline of Events

June 17th, 1925	Creation of the Geneva protocol of 1925.
April 10th, 1972	Creation of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC).
April 11th, 1992	Discovery of the Soviet Biological Warfare Program. Even if it had already been shut down, it was a direct violation of the BTWC that lasted 17 years.
January 27th, 1998	The Clinton Administration proposes a plan to reinforce the BTWC verification process.
July 2001	Clinton Administration plan gets turned down, and all negotiations to reinforce the verification process of the BTWC fade.
March 20th, 2003	Iraq was invaded by the US, Polish, Australian, and British troops over claims of possession of weapons of mass destruction.
April 28th, 2004	Resolution (S/RES/1540 (2004)) regarding the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, passed in the UN security council.

## Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- I. [Geneva Protocol of 1925](#)
- II. [Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention of 1972](#)

III. [Australia Group](#)

## Past Action

The main purpose of the development of the Geneva Protocol and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention was to control biological weapon research in order to avoid any future catastrophes. Furthermore, since the issue at hand is also focused on the reinforcing of the BTWC's verification process, it is worth mentioning that the 1998 Clinton administration (US) proposed "an international inspection system to help detect and deter cheating". The president's proposal was based on 4 tools: Declarations, Voluntary Visits, Non-challenge Clarifying Visits (NCV)s, and Challenge Investigations. The president didn't seem to neglect concerns of strengthening the verification measures; "The protocol should also require the BTWC implementing organization to protect any sensitive information it receives from BTWC Parties." (Clinton Administration, 1998). Nonetheless, this was rejected by member states of the BTWC under claims that the plan was not strong enough to actually identify violations of the convention. The discussions on how to strengthen the verification process quieted down after this rejection.

In 2004, 15 nations voted unanimously to pass the Security Council resolution 1540 (S/RES/1540 (2004)) regarding the non-proliferation on Weapons of mass destruction.

## Possible Solutions

One of the aspects we believe are useful to reach a more effective verification process would be to ask every member state to submit a biennial report naming all facilities with the capable equipment to produce bioweapons, and an inventory of any and all viruses, bacteria, or other pathogens being stored/used on those facilities. A lot of pathogens used to create medicine and vaccines can be easily weaponized, so it is important to keep an eye on all facilities working with biological agents.

Another measure to be taken could be to form a UN agency that consists of inspectors (coming from all UN states) to perform scheduled and short-notice inspections to all facilities recorded on

the biennial reports. All inspectors would sign a non-disclosure agreement on everything they see in the facilities, as long as they do not raise concerns about the production of a biological weapon. The non-disclosure agreement would be a way to try to get the countries worried about getting spied on to agree to the inspections. Many countries have already agreed to having on-site inspections for example on the Chemical weapons Convention, so this might work with biological warfare as well.

Many nations may not agree with these terms, so delegates should debate and try to reach a middle ground in order to solve the uncertainty present with biological warfare.

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