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A snapshot of pandemic lessons for the Biological Weapons Convention

Earlier reports in this series have focused on discussions within meetings of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) – the international treaty that prohibits biological weapons – that are relevant to the current COVID-19 pandemic. This report takes a different approach – examining how developments in the pandemic and the responses to them might provide useful inputs in the context of the BWC. This report also includes comments by the UN Secretary-General on the relevance of the BWC in the context of the current pandemic in a Security Council debate last week.

There are lessons that can be drawn from responses to the current pandemic that might inform responses to any potential widespread biological weapons attack. While an attack with biological weapons would probably have a number of differences to the current pandemic, there would be a number of similarities in response, including pressure on health services, requirements for physical protection, and a need to develop new medical treatments and vaccines. As well as having implications for BWC Article VII (provision of ‘assistance’ by states parties if a state party is ‘exposed to danger’ because of a breach of the Convention) and Article X (assistance and cooperation), there are also implications for efforts to have ongoing arrangements within the BWC for review of scientific and technological developments. With the pandemic ongoing, there are few specific lessons to be identified at this stage. More useful at this point is to identify areas of work that may be able to draw out relevant lessons for the BWC in the future.

One of the factors that has complicated the response to COVID-19 has been that it is a new disease. As such, it is taking time to learn how this new disease spreads from person to person, how it affects different parts of the body and how those with the disease might be treated most effectively. Much preparation work for response to an attack with biological weapons has focused on diseases that have well-established characteristics, such as anthrax or smallpox. However, there is always the possibility of the use in an attack of a new or modified disease for which the characteristics are unknown to the responders. In such a case, there may be particular lessons learned from the rapid international efforts to understand and characterise COVID-19.

Different political systems in different countries have taken different approaches to responding to the pandemic. It is up to national political processes to arrive at a judgement as to whether any particular approach was the most appropriate in any individual national context. One key lesson has been that those countries that took prompt action in response to the pandemic have tended to have fewer cases of the disease.

All actions taken to limit the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus that causes COVID-19 have come with some costs. Some of these have been directly financial, such as the extra costs of medical care and the purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE), i.e., masks, gloves, aprons, etc. These financial expenditures have been dwarfed by the economic costs associated with measures to limit physical interactions between people and so reduce possible transmission opportunities. How such costs might be calculated can be dependent on the assumptions made about which costs can be attributed to lockdown measures rather than other broader economic influences. Nonetheless, similar measures might be needed in response to an attack with biological

weapons and therefore better understandings of the costs and benefits of particular measures and how such measures fit together could assist with prompt decision making by political authorities.

Health services have been under considerable pressure. Within some countries, public health is a devolved matter and so there have been variations of response across some national situations. There are many variations in ways any individual society might choose to structure its health services. From the perspective of promoting resilience in the face of possible deliberate disease, a key yardstick is whether the health services in any particular context are capable of dealing with a surge of cases. As any biological attack that produced casualties on the scale of the current pandemic would be likely to be perceived as a threat to national security, provision of governmental resources through mechanisms other than usual health budgets may be worthy of consideration.

Results from evaluations of pandemic preparedness were presented at a number of BWC meetings. These have included activities such as the [Global Health Security Index](#) and assessments derived from information supplied under the World Health Organization International Health Regulations. The results of such evaluations suggested some countries were better prepared than others. However, a mismatch between the predictions of the evaluations and the impact of the pandemic has appeared with some of the countries evaluated as best prepared having a high *per capita* number of cases. Careful examination of why such a mismatch occurred could contribute useful understandings to enhance preparedness for response to a biological attack.

The UN Security Council teleconference on ‘Pandemics and security’

On Thursday 2 July, the UN Security Council held an open [video teleconference](#) (VTC) on the subject of ‘Pandemics and security’. The Presidency of the Council circulated beforehand a concept note, [S/2020/571](#), in support of the VTC. This debate came the day after the adoption by the Council of [resolution 2532](#) on pandemic response.

The [first speaker in the debate was UN Secretary-General António Guterres](#) who noted the relevance of the BWC in the context of the VTC, stating ‘as we consider how to improve our response to future disease threats, we should also devote serious attention to preventing the deliberate use of diseases as weapons’. He described the Convention in a broader context before relating this to the pandemic, noting that the BWC ‘codifies a strong and longstanding norm against the abhorrent use of disease as a weapon, and now has 183 States Parties. I urge the 14 States that have not yet joined the Convention to do so without any further delay. We also need to strengthen the Convention, which lacks an oversight institution and contains no verification provisions, by enhancing its role as a forum for the consideration of preventative measures, robust response capacities and effective counter-measures.’

The Secretary-General highlighted the overlap between resilience against the threat of biological weapons and effective public health measures, stating: ‘Fortunately, the best counter to biological weapons is effective action against naturally occurring diseases. Strong public and veterinary health systems are not only an essential tool against COVID-19, but also an effective deterrent against the development of biological weapons.’ He noted that: ‘All of these issues must be on the agenda next year at the Convention’s Review Conference’ and closed the section of his statement on the BWC with the words: ‘Given the speed at which pathogens spread in an interconnected world, we must ensure that all countries have resilient and appropriate capacities to respond quickly and robustly to any potential global and deliberate biological event.’

This is the fifth in a series of reports looking at the impacts relating to the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to the BWC published by the [BioWeapons Prevention Project \(BWPP\)](#), a global network of civil society actors dedicated to the permanent elimination of biological weapons and of the possibility of their re-emergence. These reports follow the style of the daily reports that have been produced for all BWC meetings since the Sixth Review Conference in 2006 and are posted to <http://www.bwpp.org/covid.html> where links can be found to background materials that readers may find useful as well as to an email subscription link. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie, [CBW Events](#), who is solely responsible for their contents. The author can be contacted via richard@cbw-events.org.uk. Financial support for these reports has been gratefully received from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Ireland.