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The Biological Weapons Convention and responses to disease

The 1972 [Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention](#) (BWC/BTWC) is the international treaty to prohibit possession of biological weapons. As biological weapons are essentially tools for inducing deliberate disease, activities within the context of the BWC have examined responses to naturally and accidentally occurring disease as well as to deliberate acts owing to the overlap of responses. There are lessons to be learned from past BWC activities and discussions for responses to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as impacts of the pandemic on BWC activities that need to be considered.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a situation unprecedented in living memory. While there were some hopes at the beginning of the pandemic that it may be over in some weeks, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the disease will be impacting upon humankind for some time to come. Unlike an influenza pandemic which tends to pass within a year, there is a strong likelihood that the novel coronavirus will remain in circulation in the human population for a considerable time.

Most countries have been feeling the impact of COVID-19 and the world will not be free of the SARS-COV-2 coronavirus that causes it until all outbreak hotspots are effectively dealt with. A complicating factor is that the pandemic coincides with a challenging global political environment in which issues relating to the disease have, on occasions, become mixed in with unrelated geo-political issues.

Many public discussions of how the pandemic may be brought to an end have been focused on the possibilities of vaccines. While there are a number of vaccine candidates being researched, it is not clear how quickly any viable products can be developed and, significantly, be manufactured and distributed in sufficient quantities around the world. The solution to the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to be a combination of measures such as disease surveillance (including testing and contact tracing), improved treatments for those with the disease, preventive medical countermeasures such as vaccines, and preventive physical measures such as social distancing and quarantining. These types of measures have all been discussed at BWC meetings in recent years.

The Biological Weapons Convention

The BWC was the first international treaty to prohibit possession of an entire class of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). A key input into the negotiations for the Convention was a World Health Organization (WHO) study entitled *Health Aspects of Chemical and Biological Weapons* published in 1970. Embodied in this work, and made more explicit in the 2004 follow-up, is the concept that the best counter to deliberately caused disease is to have effective understandings of and responses to naturally occurring disease. The 2004 WHO study, *Public health response to biological and chemical weapons – WHO guidance*, is recommended reading for anyone dealing with BWC issues.

The BWC holds annual meetings in the years between its five-yearly Review Conferences. These are Meetings of Experts (MXs) held back-to-back during the middle of the year and a Meeting of States Parties at the end of the year. As a number of other international meetings have already been postponed or adapted owing to the pandemic, consideration needs to be given to how the work of the MXs could continue with

COVID-19 restrictions in place. Some aspects of the MXs, such as the exchange of ideas through working papers, are easy to replicate if there were to be limitations to physical meetings; others, such as the less formal interactions that allow exchanges of experiences, would be harder to do in virtual settings.

Perceptions of disease

There has always been an innate and instinctive human fear of disease. For many people, the instinctive fear of deliberate disease is greater than that for naturally occurring disease. This has been a significant contributor to the taboo against biological weapons.

For centuries, allegations have been made about the misuse of disease. These have mostly been propaganda activities intended as political messages to suggest the alleged perpetrators are unworthy. An effective response to this has been to examine any available information in factual terms and separate this from the rhetoric.

An underlying assumption of much contemporary discussion is that the impact of COVID-19 could inspire an increased interest in development or use of biological weapons. The same logic would have applied in relation to the 1918-19 flu pandemic that killed a larger number of people than had died on the battlefields of the First World War. Yet the most comprehensive published review of the nascent biological warfare policies of the post-First World War period, [Volume I](#) of the SIPRI six-volume series, provides no evidence of such an influence. Nevertheless, COVID-19 has highlighted possible vulnerabilities that potential perpetrators might look to in the future. For example, there have been instances of peacekeeping troops being unable to patrol as usual and of major warships being out of service for weeks to deal with outbreaks on board.

About these reports

In light of the discussion above, there is benefit in drawing out lessons from past BWC activities that would be relevant to responses to COVID-19 and to examine impacts that the pandemic may have on the BWC. Hence this series of reports in the style of the daily summaries from the BWC meetings. These COVID-19 impact reports will be supported by the webpage listed below which will include direct links for documents and articles referred to in the reports as well as links to other useful materials.

Within this series of reports a number of subjects will be examined, such as how BWC meetings have looked at distinguishing deliberate disease outbreaks from natural events or accidental releases. There are lessons that can be drawn from past inputs to BWC annual meetings on the importance of disease surveillance. BWC Article VII deals with the provision of 'assistance' if a State Party is 'exposed to danger' because of a breach of the Convention. BWC Article X relates to access to peaceful benefits of the life sciences. There are lessons to be drawn from Article VII and Article X discussions for responding to disease outbreaks. The reverse of this is also true as there will be lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic for Article VII and Article X discussions in future BWC meetings, in particular as the pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities in responses to infectious disease. This may also lead to implications for future BWC programmes of work, and in particular the Ninth Review Conference (scheduled to be held in 2021). Impacts on the practicalities of holding BWC meetings following from measures to control the pandemic will be examined. Further ideas might well arise to either supplement or replace proposed topics as the series progresses.

This is the first 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.