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## Pandemic influences on possible agenda topics for BWC meetings

This report looks towards the Ninth five-yearly Review Conference of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC), scheduled to be held at the end of 2021, and what might result from it. At first glance this may seem premature as there are issues yet to be resolved for convening the annual meetings this year. On the other hand, any future analyst looking back may well evaluate the success or failure of the Convention at this time by a simple yardstick – was the BWC community able to promptly overcome the disruptions to multilateral meetings in 2020 to ensure that the international efforts to control biological weapons, focused around the BWC, were reinvigorated by the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic? A major contribution of the BWC to the longer-term outcomes of responses to the pandemic will come from decisions for future action taken at the Ninth Review Conference. It is too early to suggest a specific package of topics for an inter-sessional programme of work that could follow the Review Conference. BWC states parties hold a variety of perspectives and aspirations in relation to the Convention and there will be the need for a programme that balances these.

BWC Article VII deals with the provision of ‘assistance’ if a state party is ‘exposed to danger’ because of a breach of the Convention and is the focal point for discussion of how states parties would provide humanitarian assistance to each other in the event of an attack with biological weapons. [[Report 3 in this series](#) examined past pandemic-relevant Article VII and Article X discussions.] Lessons may be learned from the current pandemic to enhance preparedness for any future outbreak of a new disease that might be deliberate. It is already possible to identify situations where pre-COVID-19 pandemic preparedness had a mismatch with events, such as a planning assumption some countries had that requirements for sudden additional supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) could be met through imports. Shortages of supplies meant this was not possible at the onset of the pandemic. A separate illustration of response challenges relates to transnational research in the development of vaccines and medical treatments. While much research of this nature is running smoothly, there remain questions regarding the optimum way to distribute the products that might result from such research. There is a possibility that any perceived unfairness in relation to access to vaccines, pharmaceutical treatments or protective equipment during the pandemic could lead to these issues being raised prominently within BWC meetings. Moreover, gaining active global endorsement for a Review Conference decision to support future humanitarian activities in response to deliberate disease, however structured and whatever it encompassed, would require a perception of fairness. Given the experience of the pandemic, there is a rationale for states parties to be willing to commit additional resources to an inter-sessional work programme that was seen as having potential to make progress in Article VII-related areas.

BWC Article X relates to access to peaceful benefits of the life sciences. There has long been a recognition of the overlap between this Article and Article VII through the need, for example, for capacity building in order to make use of Article VII assistance. One lesson from the pandemic has been the indications of shortages of available staff with relevant skills to increase the throughput of laboratories processing medical samples in some countries. The BWC [Implementation Support Unit \(ISU\)](#)

maintains the [assistance and cooperation database](#), known informally as the Article X database, and the [proposal from France and India](#) to establish an Article VII database along similar lines remains on the table. Such databases, appropriately resourced, could facilitate filling capacity gaps identified during the pandemic that were relevant to possible response to any future biological attack.

Alongside decisions on the database options, the Review Conference will decide on the renewal of the mandate of the ISU as well as considering the scope of ISU activities. The ISU has three staff and so any additional activities would require an increase in resources. Past proposals for broadening the ISU mandate have been hindered by policies in some countries to limit budgetary increases of international bodies to zero growth in real terms. Again, a post-pandemic rationale to support effective actions that should reduce the impact of any future deliberate disease might allow for decisions to be taken at the Ninth Review Conference that would have been difficult to have taken earlier.

The consequences of the current pandemic have raised awareness of the impact a widespread biological attack might have. There remains a need to keep controls on materials and technologies that can be used to enable biological weapons under constant review and thus strengthen BWC Articles I, III and IV – these contain the prohibitions against biological weapons, a prohibition against helping anyone else get biological weapons and the obligation to implement those prohibitions on a national basis, respectively. There will be a need for further research to understand the family of viruses that is known as coronaviruses, but also a need to carry this out in a safe manner with active steps to ensure that the research is hindered from being used for hostile purposes.

Issues of how scientific and technological (S&T) developments relevant to the BWC should be reviewed under the Convention have been the subject of discussion for a number of years. When keeping measures to control biological weapons under constant review there are a number of assessments that need to be made based on emerging scientific evidence. The emerging understandings of COVID-19 have been a clear example of the complex interactions at the interface where science and policy meet. These circumstances illustrate the challenges of developing policy while the science is not entirely clear. Lessons learned from the handling of scientific advice in relation to the pandemic may assist states parties in developing arrangements for review of S&T developments under the BWC. There have been earlier situations where outbreaks of new diseases were challenging for arrangements for scientific advice that were in place at the time and so those arrangements had to be revised in the light of lessons learned. A widely-written about example of this was the emergence of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, commonly known as mad cow disease, which was the subject of a [public inquiry](#) in the UK which had a particular focus on the role of [scientific advice](#).

While issues of international law and developed norms are often the focal points for discussion of a subject like biological weapons, there is also a key point to be emphasized about the role of effective public health measures in this area. Conceptually, biological weapons are tools to create deliberate disease. The further the potential impact of disease caused by any weapon of this type can be reduced, the smaller the incentive to develop and maintain such a weapon becomes. If governments respond to the current pandemic with outcomes that not only reduce the impacts of existing infectious diseases but that also enhance abilities to identify and contain new infectious diseases, this will be an extremely powerful action to counter biological weapons as well as being good for global health. The Ninth Review Conference for the BWC should be a significant contributor to such outcomes.

*This is the seventh 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](mailto:richard@cbw-events.org.uk). Financial support for these reports has been gratefully received from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Ireland.*