
Meeting of the States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction

17 August 2021

English and Russian only

2020 Meeting

Geneva, 22-25 November 2021

Meeting of Experts on Assistance, Response, and Preparedness

Geneva, 6-7 September 2021

Item 7 of the provisional agenda

Examination of how the concept of mobile biomedical units might contribute to effective assistance, response and preparation with a view to enhancing implementation of the Convention

Strengthening the Biological Weapons Convention Operationalising mobile biomedical units to deliver protection against biological weapons, investigate their alleged use, and to suppress epidemics of various etiology

Submitted by the Russian Federation

I. Background

1. In 2014, the Russian Federation launched an initiative to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). A survey of States Parties was conducted confirming a strong interest in this matter and preparedness to become engaged.

2. After conducting the survey and holding additional open-ended discussion and consultations in 2014-2015, the Russian Federation with its co-sponsors, Armenia, Belarus and China, introduced a revised draft decision.¹ The proposals contained therein are based upon a realistic evaluation of the situation in the BWC such as the continuing lack of agreement on the issue of verification. Nonetheless, the draft decision envisaged negotiations on a broad-based and balanced package of measures to improve implementation of almost all provisions of the Convention. Relevant consultations and discussions were held during the intersessional programme of work in 2017-2020.

3. Following a transparent and inclusive exchange of views and bearing in mind the widely recognised need to strengthen the BWC, we would like to reiterate of ideas on establishing an international institutional mechanism under the BWC, mobile biomedical units, to implement the three elements of our initiative:

(a) advancement of international co-operation for prevention of infectious disease pursuant to Article X;

(b) provision of assistance and delivery of protection against biological weapons pursuant to Article VII;

¹ BWC/MSP/2015/WP.4/Rev. 1, dated 16 December 2015.



(c) investigation of alleged use of biological weapons pursuant to Article VI.

4. In the proposed concept these elements are taken together since by implementing them in combination useful synergies may be achieved and limited resources utilised efficiently. The concept benefited greatly from applying lessons learned from the many decades of conducting anti-epidemic programmes in the Russian Federation and injecting relevant international input.

II. Rationale

5. It should be noted that there are no institutional mechanisms for practical implementation of Article X, VII and VI in the format of the BWC. Such a situation does not contribute to achieving the object and purpose of the Convention while weakening the authority and robustness of its regime originally envisaged to be a reliable bulwark against the threat of “biological agents being used as weapons”. These shortcomings were meant to be fixed in the negotiations on a supplementary protocol to the BWC in 1995-2001. However, the negotiations were prevented from completion at a time when their finalisation was within sight. As a result, the identified issues remain outstanding and topical.

6. The above conclusion is confirmed by the common understandings arrived at by States Parties during the intersessional programme of work in 2012-2015 and in 2017-2020.

7. With respect to Article VII, it was agreed that “even where national capacity is strong, further international assistance may be required” by the affected State Party. Such assistance should be provided “rapidly” to heal the sick and prevent the spread of infectious disease outbreak. Therefore, there is value in having such rapid response capability “in advance of Article VII being invoked/before it is required” along with the agreed mechanism for its deployment. Inadequacy of the current situation having been exposed in the light of many problems during the 2014-2015 Ebola crisis in West Africa reaffirmed the need of “addressing the lack of ready operational capability.” In this connection, States Parties noted with regret that “there is no institutional mechanism under the Convention to undertake relevant activities.” Consequently, they agreed to “exploring what role, if any, the Implementation Support Unit should play within this mechanism and any additional resources for enabling such a role.”²

8. The weakness of the BWC’s regime is compounded by the lack of a Convention’s mechanism for investigating alleged use of biological weapons.

9. Article VI of the Convention specifies that a decision on initiating an investigation may be taken by the United Nations Security Council on the basis of a complaint lodged by a State Party to the BWC. That being so, it is apposite to highlight the fact that the United Nations does not have the dedicated human resources and materiel for activation in such a scenario. Therefore, if a situation of that nature arises the Security Council will have to act in an ad hoc manner in a challenging environment characterised by the deficit of time and under anticipated pressure from other demanding problems.

10. Bearing in mind the above facts, a case for creating the BWC’s in-house capability for investigating alleged use of biological weapons presents as obvious. As specified in Article VI of the Convention, a decision on initiating such an investigation would remain in the domain of the Security Council. The capability established under the BWC would be put at the disposal of the Security Council following the modalities to be spelled out in a Relationship Agreement to be concluded between the duly authorised agents representing the two sides. The Agreement would define, inter alia, rights and obligations of the contracting sides, lay down the modus operandi in case of triggering a situation foreseen by its provisions, etc.

² Paragraphs 44, 46 (a), (c), (f), 47(i), 48 of the 2015 report of the Meeting of States Parties (BWC/MSP/2015/6, dated 27 January 2016); also see paragraph 40 of Part II of the final document of the Seventh Review Conference (BWC/CONF.VII/7, dated 13 January 2012).

11. Lessons learned convincingly demonstrate that it is instrumental to ensure the availability of a fully-fledged apparatus staffed with trained and experienced personnel who are provided with specialised equipment. At the same time, creating this capability exclusively for investigations of alleged use would hardly be an efficient investment of limited resources and legitimate concerns may be expressed in that connection, although the financial implications would be modest for 183 States Parties. Accordingly, it should be utilised in conjunction with addressing related and equally important tasks.

12. If an Article VII situation occurs, the same capability would deploy at the central level under the BWC framework as a means of rapid reaction to deliver protection against biological weapons to be supplemented by other types of assistance that States Parties would provide to the affected State upon its request if the Security Council of the United Nations so decides.

13. The availability of a ready to use and capable asset under the BWC for rapid response in investigating alleged use and prompt delivery of assistance would serve as an additional deterrence against a threat of use of biological agents as weapons.

14. Under routine day-to-day activities this capability would be utilised in the BWC format to take forward implementation of Article X in order to assist interested States Parties upon request in preventing and mitigating naturally occurring epidemics.³ For this purpose, opportunities for mutually beneficial co-operation could be explored together with the WHO.

15. It is our view that a major contribution to addressing the above three tasks can be made by the introduction of mobile biomedical units operating as part of a future international structure created to enhance the Convention's implementation.

16. The pandemic of the new coronavirus infection has clearly demonstrated the relevance and effectiveness of mobile laboratories in emergency situations of a sanitary and epidemiological nature. Such units equipped with necessary facilities launched laboratory diagnostics of COVID-19 from the first days of the pandemic even before the full-scale deployment of national stationary laboratory networks.

17. Expertise on mobile laboratories is available in many countries of the world and is used both to ensure their own national biological security and to provide assistance abroad.

III. Russian Federation's experience of operating mobile anti-epidemic teams

18. The Russian Federation's specialised anti-epidemic teams (SPEB)⁴ served as a model in conceptualising this proposal. Being an integral part of national anti-plague system since 1963 they have accumulated a considerable amount of expertise in monitoring, evaluation and response under various conditions and situations including emergency environment.

19. Operations of SPEB are distinguished by high mobility, self-sufficiency, multipurpose functionality, employment of high-tech equipment, observance of biosafety norms, modular deployment approach, and diversified training of their personnel.

20. Main areas of SPEB activities include the following:

- (a) laboratory diagnosis of infectious agents from human biomedical samples and analysis of environmental samples;
- (b) determining cause-effect connection of outbreaks of infectious diseases of various etiology;
- (c) organisation and implementation of emergency anti-epidemic measures;

³ Depending on the evaluation of the concept's future operationalisation and performance and interest among States Parties, similarly structured assets could be later established under the BWC for veterinary and phytosanitary situations.

⁴ Russian acronym is SPEB;

(d) temporary substitution of depleted local public health personnel in emergencies.

21. The Russian Federation has developed and put into use a methodology for employing SPEB to respond to public health emergencies. Depending on a nature of a given situation, it allows to selectively deploy personnel and supporting laboratory modules. The Russian Federation's anti-plague institutes have facilities to train personnel, including foreign professionals, for public health work in emergency situations.

22. Since 1963 when SPEB were raised, they have been utilised in mitigating over 118 public health emergencies both nationally and abroad. Recently they played a role in ensuring biosafety at major international events taking place in the Russian Federation such as the 2013 Summer Universiade in Kazan, the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, 2015 SCO and BRICS summits in Ufa, 2015 FINA World Championships in Kazan, 2017 World Festival of Youth and Students in Sochi, 2017 FIFA Confederations Cup in Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, Kazan and Sochi, 2018 FIFA World Cup in 11 cities in Russia, 2019 World Winter Universiade in Krasnoyarsk, Russia – Africa Summit in Sochi in 2019, as well as during special mission of the WHO Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN) in Tajikistan in 2020 and rescue mission of the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations after the catastrophe in Beirut in 2020.

23. Having reaffirmed their usefulness and effectiveness abroad in the fight against Ebola in 2014-2015 and trained over 100 local medical personnel in anti-epidemic techniques in Guinea, SPEB are now offered at the international level as one of the instruments of co-operation in implementing an integrated approach to ensuring biosafety in areas struck by natural disasters, affected by social conflicts as well as in the foci of infectious diseases of various etiology.

24. As a whole mobile laboratories can be used for training and improving skills of epidemiologists and virologists to work in the real-life field conditions, to ensure national biological safety during mass events, as well as can be put into practice during international exercises and work on algorithms for joint response to infectious threats.

IV. Conclusion

25. In our view, taking forward the concept of creating and employing multi-purpose biomedical rapid reaction units constitutes a new paradigm of improving the BWC's implementation at the international level. Based on the available record of their deployment, it can be asserted with confidence that raising such a capability under the BWC and its follow-up funding through a future programme and budget process based on the approved scale of assessments will have very modest financial implications for 183 States Parties. In terms of the cost-benefit criterion this may become an optimal investment of the relatively insignificant amount of money in the interests of achieving the aims of the Convention.

26. This proposal combines the Convention's basic tenets of collective security and promoting international co-operation for peaceful purposes. Such convergence would result in creating an institutional basis for strengthening the BWC in a number of important areas. It will instill new life into the Convention ensuring its relevance for the future and its continued responsiveness to the interests and requirements of all States Parties.