

# EDITORIAL

## PREVENTING THE SPREAD OF BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS

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On 26 March 2005 it will be 30 years since the entry into force of the Biological and Toxins Weapons Convention (BTWC). This is an appropriate juncture to assess how far the world, and Africa in particular, has come in terms of preventing the use of disease as a weapon.

In recent years many developed countries have drawn attention to the threat of the use of biological weapons. This attention has, to a great degree, focused on the threat posed by terrorist groups, which may seek to develop and use biological weapons. The result has been that some countries have increased their biodefence spending, sought ways of improving the control over pathogens, and increased the regulation of science. This threat perception prompted the United Nations Security Council to pass Resolution 1540 (2004), which is a legally binding resolution that requires all states to refrain from supporting non-state actors that attempt to acquire, use or transfer nuclear, chemical or biological weapons and their delivery systems.

Do African countries share the perception that the threat of the use and development of biological weapons is increasing? Do African countries perceive themselves to be at risk from states or terrorist groups that may use biological weapons? What is the significance of the BTWC for Africa? What more can be done to ensure that biological weapons are not used or developed on the African continent? What can non-governmental organisations, scientists, academics and government officials do to make Africa more secure? These are some of the questions that contributors to this volume have addressed.

Several papers in this issue consider the perception of the relative insignificance of the threat of biological weapons use in Africa. This appears to be reflected in the high number of African states that have either not joined the BTWC, or that have signed but not ratified the convention. The authors of these papers present cogent arguments to support the contention that biological weapons control is an issue that should receive the attention of all African Union members. In his commentary the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, Nobuyasu Abe, notes that 'increasing the number of African states parties to the BTWC would bring the convention closer to universality and send a strong message that the issue of biological weapons is truly a global concern and that Africa and the rest of the international community are united in grappling with it'. This view is echoed in the contribution by Dominique Loye and John Borrie, which provides details of the biotechnology, weapons and humanity appeal by the International Red Cross. Loye and Borrie also present a number of reasons that African countries should take the concern about biological weapons seriously. They argue that because African countries often lack sophisticated public health systems, a deliberate outbreak of disease could have catastrophic consequences.

In his contribution, Dr Ben Steyn considers the implications of UN Security Council Resolution 1540 and raises important questions about how the resolution will be interpreted and implemented. His article highlights the many difficulties, which are inherent to attempts to

control biological agents. Through his analysis it becomes clear that the cost to states of implementing the resolution will be high and he indicates that unless key questions are answered about its implementation, the resolution may 'create a false sense of security while the threat remains'.

In his paper Thuo Njuguna draws attention to the effects that deliberate disease may have on the already overburdened public health system in East Africa and notes that the public health and disease surveillance systems necessary to deal with naturally occurring disease and deliberately caused disease are the same. In other words, strengthening public health systems and the ability to carry out disease surveillance is an important step in defending populations against the effect of deliberately caused disease. Dorothy Preslar's

commentary carries this argument further and assesses the potential benefits (and dangers) of increased transparency in reporting disease outbreaks.

In her contribution Angela Woodward considers the type of legislation that states need to adopt to ensure they are in compliance with their obligations under the BTWC and UNSC Resolution 1540 and assesses the status of such legislation in African states. Her assessment reveals that there is still much that can be done in Africa.

It is my hope that this publication will serve to initiate and inform increased debate and discussion about how Africans can work towards ensuring that biological weapons are never used or developed on this continent.

*Chandré Gould*