

3. CHEMICAL AND BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS

BACKGROUND

The use of chemical weapons during the First World War led the international community to increase its efforts to eliminate them. Such efforts were also extended to the related problem posed by the prospect of biological agents being used as weapons of warfare. By 1925 these initiatives resulted in the signing of the Geneva Protocol, which prohibits the use of "asphyxiating poisonous or other gases, analogous liquids, materials or devices as well as bacteriological (biological) methods of warfare."

The Protocol's failure to ban the development, production and stockpiling of chemical and biological weapons, however, led to a growing recognition of the need for more comprehensive restrictions. This goal has been actively pursued in various United Nations disarmament bodies, particularly during the last twenty years.

By 1971, the difficulties of concluding a single agreement banning both chemical and biological weapons led to a decision in the Conference of the Committee on Disarmament (CCD) to consider them separately. Progress in the area of biological weapons control soon followed, producing a convention signed in 1972 which came into force three years later. Considered the first international agreement requiring actual disarmament measures, the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) prohibits the development, production, stockpiling and transfer of bacteriological or poisonous weapons, and calls for the destruction of existing stocks. As of 1 January 1988, the Convention had been signed by 136 states and ratified by 110 of them.

The BWC has been subject to two review conferences aimed at ensuring its effectiveness, in 1980 and 1986. Among the concerns addressed at both conferences were the ability of the Convention to cover potential weapons developments made possible by new technologies, such as recombinant deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA); the absence of provisions restricting research on biological and toxin agents, together with the possible weapons applications of such research; and problems of verifying compliance with the Convention.

Such issues were highlighted by a stream of allegations beginning in the mid-1970s concerning the development and use of biological and toxin weapons by the superpowers and their Allies. Particularly noteworthy were charges that the Soviet Union and its allies had used toxin weapons in South East Asia (i.e., yellow rain), and the inability to establish the facts conclusively.

In an attempt to strengthen the BWC further, the final declaration of the Second Review Conference included a new arrangement allowing any state to call a meeting of an advisory group of experts, if a problem arises concerning application of the Convention. It also requires the signatories to begin work on measures to prevent or reduce any "ambiguities, doubts and suspicions concerning bacteriological activities and to improve international cooperation on the peaceful uses of microbiology." Specific measures included the exchange of information concerning research facilities, biological products and the occurrence of rare diseases. In order to elaborate precise procedures for such exchanges, an Ad Hoc Group of scientific and technical experts, from the states parties, met in Geneva from 31 March to 15 April 1987. The 1986 Review Conference had