

## 2. CHEMICAL AND BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS

### BACKGROUND

The use of chemical weapons during World War I led the international community to develop ways of prohibiting their use and development. In the period after World War I, these efforts took place at the League of Nations. In 1925, at a meeting intended to develop ways of controlling the international arms trade, a US proposal to ban exports of chemical weapons led to the creation of the Geneva Protocol<sup>1</sup> which banned the use of chemical and bacteriological weapons in war. As of 1 January 1990, there were 125 parties to the Geneva Protocol.

The Geneva Protocol remains the primary international legislation on chemical weapons. However, its limitations have been clear since it was first signed. While the Protocol prohibits the use of chemical and bacteriological weapons in war, it does nothing to prohibit the development, production, transfer or stockpiling of such weapons. Efforts at the League of Nations after 1925 to expand chemical weapons limitations collapsed with the failure of the League in the 1930s. In the wake of the use of nuclear weapons, after World War II efforts to limit chemical weapons took a back seat to negotiations on atomic weapons.

It was not until 1968 that official international efforts began again, this time under the auspices of the United Nations. At that time, the question of chemical and bacteriological weapons was placed on the agenda of the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Commission (ENDC). In 1971, a shift in the position of the Soviet Union opened the way for consideration of chemical weapons separately from biological weapons. Britain had originally proposed this separation in 1968, but the idea was strongly opposed by the Soviet Union. By 10 April 1972, the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) was open for signature.<sup>2</sup> The BWC prohibits the use, development, production and stockpiling of biological weapons. As of 1 January 1991, 125 countries were parties to the Convention.

There have been two review conferences of the BWC, in 1980 and 1986. The conferences discussed ways of enhancing the convention. Issues of concern included developments made possible by new technologies such as recombinant deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), the absence of provisions restricting research on biological and toxin agents, and problems in verifying the convention. The second review conference in 1986 established a new arrangement which allows any signatory state to call for a meeting of an advisory group of experts if a problem arises concerning the application of the BWC. As well, signatories were required to begin work to reduce ambiguities and improve

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<sup>1</sup>The 1925 Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare, Geneva, May 1925.

<sup>2</sup>The Convention on the Prohibition, Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction, 26 March 1972.