

## *Treaties in the Time of Anthrax: The United States Should Strengthen the Ban on Bio-Weapons*

By Barbara Hatch Rosenberg

If nothing is done to take international action to strengthen the ban on germ weapons, the future may hold far more damaging attacks with newer and deadlier agents, genetically engineered to be unidentifiable and untreatable. The catastrophic potential of bioterrorism is so great that prevention, not just damage limitation, must be the aim. Military and civilian experts believe that, at present, terrorists could mount a large-scale germ attack only with the assistance of a state possessing a sophisticated bio-weapons program. We need to cut off those sources, now and in the future.

To do that, we need to know where they are. Unfortunately, U.S. intelligence has a poor record in the biological field, but on-site monitoring of compliance with the biological weapons ban would give it a big assist. Yet, even with the taboo on germ weapons broken and the whole country in shock, the Bush administration has not altered its antipathy to international action that would do just that.

A protocol to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention of 1972, which bans germ weapons but contains no verification provisions, was close to completion last July when the U.S., alone among the 144 parties to the convention, turned it down and brought the negotiations to a halt. The administration chose to do without the protocol's vital mechanisms for confirming or resolving suspicions about specific biological installations abroad, and for bringing the international community together to deal with violations.

America's allies, all of whom considered the protocol an essential and urgently needed element in international security arrangements,

were stunned by the U.S. rejection. Even before the recent anthrax attacks, they were apprehensive that retreat from a ten-year international endeavor would undermine the ban. Now, with terrorism on everyone's mind and the five-year review of the Biological Weapons Convention about to start, they have been conducting a quiet but intense diplomatic effort aimed at keeping international discussions going next year.

The upcoming review of the convention will give the Bush administration an extraordinary opportunity to redeem the mistake that, in July, seemed less serious than it does now, in the light of the anthrax attacks. The U.S. can reaffirm its commitment to the elimination of germ weapons by agreeing to continue negotiations after the review conference to find acceptable, legally binding means for monitoring the bio-weapons ban. With a war on terrorism underway, it is unlikely that any party to the convention, including those suspected of proliferation, would refuse to participate.

The U.S. can't do it alone. We cannot afford to lose this fleeting opportunity for international action, if we want to prevent the ultimate exploitation of disease as a weapon.

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