

Opinion

Strengthening of BWC in Light of COVID-19

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Biological and Toxin Weapon Convention (BTWC) was signed simultaneously in London, Moscow and Washington on April 10, 1972, and opened for signature for other states and went into force on March 1975. Pakistan signed BWC in 1972 and ratified it in 1974, and since has made great endeavors to its obligation to the regime as a signatory. Biological weapons comprise micro-organisms and natural toxins that produce disease in humans, animals and plants. The potential danger of a given bioweapon is measured by its lethality, infectivity and its virulence. Other important considerations include the possibility or probability of medical treatment and existence or otherwise of immunization vaccines. Due to their inherent characteristics of delay in detection and unidentified spread of affected area, makes it is the most dangerous WMD and thus biological weapons cause more casualties and have a greater psychological impact than conventional weapons [1].

Now the Convention is 45 years old, and 183 countries are member to it [2], but effectively the implementation of BWC is still lacking, such as lack of universality many countries remain outside the Convention, lack of verification the BWC contains no measures to check for compliance, a history of non-compliance some States Parties have violated the BWC and others are suspected of operating illegal biological weapons programs, and advances in biosciences and biotechnology developments new biological weapons is rapidly increasing the risk that biological weapons will spread.

I like to discuss BWC articles, particularly keeping in view the COVID-19 outbreak Let's discuss the Key provisions of the Biological Weapons Convention and the attentions required on each of them, which includes being discussed in the light of effects of COVID-19 pandemic crises:

Article I: Never under any circumstances to develop, produce, stockpile, acquire, or retain biological weapons.

Article II: To destroy or divert to peaceful purposes biological agents, toxins, weapons, equipment, and means of delivery before joining.

Article III: Not to transfer, or in any way assist, encourage or induce anyone else to acquire or retain biological weapons.

Article IV: To take any national measures necessary to implement the provisions of the BWC domestically.

Article V: To consult bilaterally and multilaterally and cooperate in solving any problems with the implementation of the BWC.

Article VI: To request the UN Security Council to investigate alleged breaches of the BWC and to comply with its subsequent decisions.

Article VII: To assist States which have been exposed to danger as a result of a violation of the BWC.

Article X: To facilitate the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials, and information for peaceful purposes.

It is now, the world is in the fifth month since the pandemic outreach, and no nobody knows how it is developed and how it is introduced at Wuhan, Hubei. Whether we should define it as a bioweapon or a pandemic, in both cases, COVID-19 besides being challenged the definition of a bioweapon, has been directly challenged and many articles of Biological Weapon Convention. Before COVID-19 the definition of a bioweapon is that it should be widespread and very lethal, the coronavirus is widespread but not lethal causing about 2% deaths worldwide but still proved to be very dangerous as it has the power to bring societies to a standstill, it has destroyed the health system, economy and the working many systems or norms worldwide. Besides being widespread and lethal we have to redefine a bioweapon by including the word stress causing, having the power to bring society to stand still and destroying the economy.

In November 2016, BWC Eight Review Conference was a total disappointment for the state parties. There was minimal agreement on the final document mentioning no substantive program for the coming five years up to Ninth Review Conference in 2021. All these years the BWC has shown slow progress, except its Implementation Support Unit (ISU), which continued its progress even after lack of funding to implement provisions of the treaty connecting bioweapons, biosecurity, infectious diseases, non-proliferation and Science & Technology.

Now It has to be mentioned which articles of BWC needed to be critically reviewed, discussed and implemented. The Article-I, II, III, IV, and V of the convention need to be implemented vigorously at all international and national levels, every nation should have a strong commitment scientifically and politically of implementation these article at all levels, which nearly 90% of the nation's lack, noticed during this COVID-19 crisis. Whereas, Article VI, VII and X have been exposed badly and need lots of attention. It has been felt that the UN doesn't have any central facility where they can investigate the alleged breaches and comply with the subsequent decisions. They even don't have facilities to investigate the release of biological weapons as in the case of chemical weapons and even WHO was unable to play any role and may be difficult for WHO to play an active role in the future due to the suspension of funds of \$450 million from the US.

At the national and international level, the COVID-19 pandemic, the new scenario underlines the need of experts, for multilateral

cooperation of member states and with the UN including strengthening of relations with WHO and establishment of the database by member countries of the Convention, that can play an important role in dealing with bio threats and bio-emergencies. National security, economic priorities and political will need to be adopted holistically to combat the global changes and complex security threats.

Many member states on the 45th anniversary of BTWC on April 10, 2020 have issued statements mentioning the fast spreading of the Coronavirus, its worldwide effects and comment on how to deal with this in the future. They all mention that COVID-19 underlined the need for international cooperation and the most important to evolve its BWC verification process and its inability to verify any biological

warfare program, a major drawback of BWC. COVID-19 is going to put pressure on policy makers worldwide to strengthen the BWC. Nations should better prepare themselves for any next crisis and rethink to fight it globally. It is a global issue and needs the best global diplomatic efforts to have global governance.

References

1. Convention on Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction. April 10, 1972. UNITS 63 entered into force on March 26, 1975.
2. "Latest Information". United Nations Office at Geneva. Retrieved. 2018.