

The threat of Bio-terrorism

Amb. Arundhati Ghose

The author was India's Permanent representative/ Ambassador to the United Nations.

On August 18, 2008 a meeting of experts on bio-weapons was held in Geneva. On July 29, 2008 a top Al Qaeda operative was reported killed by an attack on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border by a US drone launched missile. July 2008 also saw a series of bomb blasts in Bangalore and Ahmedabad. These three disconnected events could be the predecessor of nightmare scenarios and this should not be treated as just alarmist rhetoric as, it has been agreed that bio-weapons are likely to be used by terrorists than on the battlefield. What India needs is a mechanism which also handles the security aspects of a bio-weapon attack.

On the August 18, 2008, a meeting of experts on bio-weapons was held in Geneva. The meeting considered (i) national regional and international measures to improve bio-safety and bio-security, including laboratory safety and security of pathogens and toxins and (ii) oversight, education, awareness raising and adoption and/or development of codes of conduct with the aim of preventing misuse in the context of advances in bioscience and bio-technology research with the potential of use for purposes prohibited by the Convention (the BTWC). The results of these discussions will be considered by the States Parties in December this year.

On the July 29, 2008, a top Al Qaida operative, was reported killed by an attack on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border by a US drone launched missile. Abu Khabab al-Masri, according to sources quoted by the Washington Post, headed Al Qaida's efforts to produce biological and chemical weapons before fleeing Afghanistan in 2001. Since 1999, he had distributed training manuals that contained instructions for making Chemical Weapons (CW) and Biological Weapons (BW).

July 2008 saw a series of bomb blasts in Bangalore and Ahmedabad. These blasts followed others- all in cities with an international profile-either as centres of India's economic boom or as major tourist destinations. Local explanations have been put forward and at the moment, a shadowy little-known outfit has claimed responsibility. (India, it has been said, has suffered from the largest number of terrorist attacks after Iraq and Afghanistan).

These three seemingly disconnected events, however, could hold in them the portent of nightmare scenarios- and this is not just alarmist rhetoric. It has been agreed that bioweapons are more likely to be used by terrorists than on the battlefield; the terrorists, it would appear are not focusing on mass destruction, but on the threat of creating terror, uncertainty and loss of confidence among the civilian population and images of instability and uncertainty abroad. It is significant that the International Crisis Group has identified India as one of the areas where the situation has deteriorated. In this background, the presence in the country of persons trained perhaps by individuals like al-Masri cannot be ruled out. How prepared is India for a BW attack or the threat of an attack? It is not clear whether any attempts have been made to access the training journals said to have been circulated by al-Masri, whether any attempt has been made to track them, in cooperation with the US. Despite growing bonds

with the US, the sharing of intelligence by the latter would seem to be restricted to the ISI of Pakistan, though going by newspaper reports, this relationship has come under strain in the recent past. There are, of course discussions with the US on the threats of bio-terrorism- but these seem to be restricted to interactions with the Ministry of External Affairs, which can, at best, act only in response to articulated domestic needs. The Home Ministry, already tied in knots in trying to deal with insurgencies and the aftermath of terrorist attacks that have become so routine in our country, is hardly an office that inspires confidence that it could even look at prevention of such attacks, much less WMD attacks. The Ministry of Defence is quite appropriately concerned only with protecting the military from WMD attacks; their mandate does not cover the hapless civilian population. Under the current dispensation, BW and CW threats are 'handled' by the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) working under the Ministry of Home Affairs. The NDMA is reported to have prepared standard operating procedures to be followed in the case of a BW attack. However, these responses treat an attack in the same manner as a natural disaster- in other words, the public health aspects of the response. While readily accepting that such SOPs are important and our preparedness could act as a deterrent to a terrorist planning such an attack, it is equally important to not only try to prevent such a situation from arising but to bear in mind that BW are weapons-i.e. there is hostile intent behind its use or threatened use. It is not quite the same as the outbreak of disease or an epidemic, unless these have been deliberately caused by some hostile force. Even in terms of the safety and security of laboratories where these pathogens might be available, a BW attack would imply more than an accidental release or a release due to negligence, where the intent is not hostile though the consequences would be as terrifying. At the moment there is no coordinating body in Government which would examine all aspects of a potential BW attack and take steps to try and prevent such action.

At the same time, other countries have drawn up their programmes to deal with this threat-

multilaterally, such exchange of experiences and best practices could, if there was a coordinating body within Government, perhaps in the National Security Council Secretariat, dealing with WMD terrorism, its implications and prevention, be accessed in the structures set up under the implementation of the BTWC.

It will be recalled that, in 2001, the US, by refusing to accept the painfully negotiated verification protocol to the BTWC, had seemed to have presaged the demise of the Convention. However, the compromise that had been worked out- detailed discussions amongst experts on specific topics followed by meetings at the intergovernmental level, would appear to be a much more useful, if innovative way to promote international cooperation in meeting the challenges of BW terrorism. The onus for the implementation of the Convention has been placed on the States Parties themselves and not on a so-called 'international community' which polices the compliance of the Convention. This approach has not been particularly successful in the nuclear field and has, instead led to an increase of confrontation among States, with dangerous implications. The BTWC model, on the other hand, enables all States to share expertise and experience, on the premise that all responsible States would be interested in preventing bio-terrorism- it is a common fight against groups which do not abide by basic humanitarian laws and cannot be controlled as States can.

India has been participating in these meetings on a regular basis; what is intriguing is the gap between the participation at the international level and the implementation at home. We seem to be more comfortable in exchanging views at the bilateral level than adept at absorbing information or making use of forums at the multilateral level for our benefit. While there may be an overlap in terms of issues being dealt with, there is an obvious need for a coordinating mechanism which also handles the security aspects of a BW attack and guides the activities of the NDMA in the event of such an attack.