

## Scientists Working Group on Biological and Chemical Weapons

A Washington based research organisation, the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation is known for its work aimed at enhancing international peace and security in the 21st century. The Center is funded by private foundations and individual donors. The center came into being in 1962 as the research branch of Council for a Livable World, an organisation founded in 1962 by eminent nuclear physicist Leo Szilard and other scientists. Their motive was to stop the use and spread of nuclear weapons. In 1980, the Center evolved into its own non-profit, independent organisation with key focus on nuclear weapons. The center's mandate also includes studies on other present and emerging security threats.

The center also has a programme on Biological and Chemical Weapons. It is known as the "The Scientists Working Group on Biological and Chemical Weapons Control". It was established in 1989 at the Federation of American Scientists. During November 2003, the Working Group shifted to the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation and joined the center's new programme on biological and chemical weapons control. Presently, this group is working towards reinforcing the norm against biological weapons and broadening the norm to encompass all misuse of biology.

The Working Group is involved towards writing working papers and reports on technical and policy issues. They also hold seminars and briefings for US government officials. The Working Group constitutes of members with extensive experience with biological weapons issues. The strength of a group also lies with its technical expertise. The experts contribute on a voluntary basis in the group's activities.

Vast array of issues are deliberated, discussed and researched by the Working Group. They include issues like preventing the development of biochemical disabling agents as weapons, promoting international measures to monitor

biological weapons-capable activities, global cooperative measures for combating infectious diseases, ethical education of bioscientists, and monitoring US biodefense and anti-bioterrorism activities. A year back (January 15, 2009) they have published a very detailed report titled "Reducing Biological Risks to Security: International Policy Recommendations for the Obama Administration". The report argues that even though in recent years the US government has strengthened its national preparedness and response capabilities for catastrophic disease events, including bioterrorism but is yet to pay focused attention towards evolving the prevention and response measures internationally. This lacuna demonstrates the lack of commitment on the part of US administration towards improving global public health infrastructure as well as towards reducing deliberate and accidental biological risks to global security. They have also offered various policy recommendations towards it.

The working group has issued a statement on January 26, 2010 contextualizing the biological threats for the present times. As per this statement the bioterrorist threat has been greatly exaggerated. It is felt that the bioweapons assessments should be done by taking into account the complex set of social and technical issues that shape bioweapons development and use by state and non-state actors. The group feels that the focus should be on more plausible threats than the worst-case scenarios that have largely driven discussion to date. Finally, it has been argued that the Bioterrorist threats should be seen and addressed within a wider public health context. This appears to be an important argument because it indirectly talks about the dual use utility of the investments in the health care field. Such investments would always come handy during natural or unnatural outbreak of diseases.

### References:

1. [http://www.armscontrolcenter.org/policy/biochem/scientists\\_working\\_group/](http://www.armscontrolcenter.org/policy/biochem/scientists_working_group/)
2. [http://www.armscontrolcenter.org/policy/biochem/articles/biological\\_threats\\_a\\_matter\\_of\\_balance/](http://www.armscontrolcenter.org/policy/biochem/articles/biological_threats_a_matter_of_balance/)
3. <http://www.armscontrolcenter.org/about/>