Chemical and Biological News

ARMS CONTROL

Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan Visits the OPCW

11 June 2012

The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, H.E Mr Elmar Mammadyarov, visited the OPCW Technical Secretariat in The Hague today for a meeting with Director-General Ahmet Üzümcü and other senior staff.

Director-General The commended Azerbaijan for its support to the OPCW and updated the Foreign Minister on its activities. He highlighted the preparations which are now underway for the Third Review Conference in April 2013 and stressed the importance of broad participation by States Parties in that process. Foreign Minister Mammadyarov reaffirmed Azerbaijan's continuing commitment and support to the OPCW and assured the Director-General of its willingness to help ensure a successful outcome for the Conference.

http://www.opcw.org/news/article/ foreign-minister-of-azerbaijan-visits-theopcw/

U.S. Watching Syrian Chemical Arms Amid Fear of Attack, Diversion: By Rachel Oswald

December 5, 2011

WASHINGTON — The United States is quietly but closely monitoring the status of Syria's large chemical weapons stockpile amid fears the regime of autocratic ruler Bashar Assad could use the warfare agents to quell continued political protests or divert the materials to extremist groups that operate in the region.

Government officials in Washington declined to discuss specifics of the monitoring operation or what intelligence resources were involved, citing the need to maintain secrecy about operational tactics. They acknowledged, though, that there is a great deal of concern in Washington over Syria's chemical arsenal.

"It is extremely important that we maintain visibility on Syria's chemical weapons and it is something that we as an intelligence community" are actively involved in doing, a U.S. intelligence official told *Global Security Newswire*.

A joint U.S.-Israeli surveillance campaign in Syria was first reported by the *Wall Street Journal* in late August. Since that time "it hasn't diminished in importance at all," according to another U.S. official.

Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivities surrounding the intelligence operation.

The United States is believed to have prepared contingency plans for dealing with Syria's toxic arsenal should it appear the regime is about to use the weapons or pass them to affiliated extremist organizations such as Hezbollah.

Syria is not a member of the Chemical Weapons Convention. It has also never publicly declared to the international community its chemical arsenal, which is understood to comprise hundreds of tons of nerve and blister agents, its doctrine for using such weapons or their exact capabilities. Still, Damascus' status as a chemical weapons possessor is widely accepted as fact. The Middle Eastern state is not known to have ever used those materials, which date back to the 1970s, according to information compiled by the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies. Until now Damascus is believed by most analysts to have developed them as a deterrent to outside attack, namely from Israel, and not for use against its own people.

The Assad regime, though, has earned a reputation for brutality toward its own people. More than 4,000 Syrians have been killed in the political uprising that began this past spring, according to the United Nations. The rising body count has U.S. officials and analysts concerned that if the Syrian leadership feels besieged and without other options, it could revise its calculus on the use of chemical weapons against Syrian army defectors and protesters.

In the event that violence in the country escalates into a full-blown civil war, there would likely be an effort by opposition forces to gain control of the regime's chemical weapon sites. A civil war would also likely increase the prospects of Assad ordering the use of his chemical armaments, according to Leonard Spector, deputy director of the James Martin Center.

"We are aware of the situation in Syria and continue to follow the events as they unfold," Pentagon spokeswoman Lt. Col. April Cunningham, said in a prepared statement. "The potential use of chemical weapons by any state poses a security threat to international security."

The chemical weapons surveillance campaign in Syria is not the only such effort the United States has been involved with this year. When Libyan civilians rose up in February against dictator Muammar Qadhafi's decades-long rule, U.S. intelligence and defense officials used a variety of assets to keep tabs on the nation's small stockpile of declared mustard blister agent.

The United States worked with NATO and Libyan opposition forces to establish a team of specialists that watched over Libya's known chemical weapon facilities to deter government forces from seeking to use or divert chemical warfare materials, according to an Agence France-Presse report. Undeclared sites have also been identified as the Qadhafi regime was ousted.

The State Department also said it used "national technical means" to monitor Libya's chemical sites. National technical means are typically understood to encompass reconnaissance aircraft and satellites.

Obama administration officials would not disclose whether such technology is also being used to monitor Syria's chemicalweapon sites on the grounds that revealing such details could jeopardize the integrity of the operation. Unlike in Libya, NATO and the United States have no internationally sanctioned mandate for military operations in Syria, nor do they have the relationships with Syrian opposition groups similar to those established with the Libyan rebels.

Syria's chemical weapons program is considerably larger than Libya's, which would presumably make monitoring it more of a challenge.

"This is a full-blown chemical weapons program not the remnants" of one as in Libya, Spector said. "You have large inventories... there are a lot of people milling around the sites," presumably guarding them and managing day-to-day operations.

Syria's chemical weapons program is understood to be comprised of four production facilities at al-Safira, Hama, Homs and Latakia, along with two munitions storage sites at Khan Abu Shamat and Furqlus. Additionally, there is a chemical weapons research laboratory near Damascus, according to Michelle Dover of the James Martin Center.

"You're also looking at a program that is almost completely self-sufficient from the research and production through the storage and weaponization," said Dover, citing open source information dating back to the 1980s.

The Assad regime is thought to possess between 100 and 200 Scud missiles carrying warheads loaded with sarin nerve agent. The government is also believed to have several hundred tons of sarin agent and mustard gas stockpiled that could be used in air-dropped bombs and artillery shells, according to information compiled by the James Martin Center.

"We do not have any information that suggests there have been changes to the security of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile," a State Department official said in an e-mail to GSN. "Syria is a country of significant proliferation concern, so we monitor its chemical weapons activities very closely. We will continue to work closely with like-minded countries to limit proliferation to Syria's chemical weapons program. We believe Syria's chemical weapons stockpile, composed of nerve agents and mustard gas, remains under Syrian government control."

Damascus is a well-known backer of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which both base their headquarters in the Syrian capital. Syria is also a supporter of Hezbollah and last year was accused by Israel of providing Scud ballistic missiles to the Lebanese militant group.

Noting reporting on contingency plans prepared by the Pentagon for military operations to prevent militants from obtaining Pakistani nuclear weapons, Spector said it was reasonable to extrapolate that preparations have also been made to respond to crisis situations involving Syria's chemical arms.

Such events might include the Assad regime preparing its chemical arsenal for an air attack on protesters and army defectors or the weakening of security around the chemical sites. The details of presumed action plans are a closely held secret.

"It would seem illogical to think that Pentagon has not brainstormed contingency plans," Spector said.

Spector said he believes the United States has "definitely" issued backdoor diplomatic threats to Damascus of serious consequences should Assad order chemical weapon attacks on opposition activists. "I'm sure that message has been conveyed."

Though Washington is concerned about the potential chemical weapons threat, it is not the Obama administration's primary focus in dealing with Syria, according to the issue expert. "I think they have still more urgent items that are constantly on top of the agenda" such as persuading the Arab League to pass sanctions against the regime and pushing for Assad to step down, he said.

A key factor in U.S. contingency thinking is thought to be what actions Israel could unilaterally take if it feels a chemical weapons attack or proliferation is imminent, Spector said.

Israel in June 2007 mounted a sneak aerial attack on a Syrian site at Dair Alzour that it suspected housed an unfinished atomic reactor with military applications (see *GSN*, March 31, 2008).

A crucial element of any potential Israeli calculus on striking against Syria's chemical assets would be identifying the exact location of the weapons, Spector said.

"You have a lot of sites [in Syria] and not all of them may be known and you really have to do a lot of work, you really have to get everything," Spector said.

Also likely weighing on Israeli and U.S. thinking is whether an attack on Syria's chemical arsenal could backfire by pushing opposition forces to rally around Damascus in response to a foreign attack, Spector said. "You don't want to create an environment where the country rallies around the government because they face an external attack."

The Israeli Embassy in Washington did not respond to requests for comment by press time.

Source: http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/ us-watching-syrian-chemical-arms-amidfear-attack-diversion/

DISARMAMENT

Course on Emergency Medical Assistance for Victims of Chemical Incidents Held in Ukraine

May 24, 2012

The OPCW and Government of Ukraine jointly organised a course on emergency medical assistance for the victims of chemical incidents or attacks, including chemicalwarfare agents, in Kyiv from 7 to 11 May 2012. Eighteen Russian-speaking experts from 14 States Parties* took part in the course, which related to Article X of the Chemical Weapons Convention and was held at the Ukrainian Scientific and Practical Centre of Emergency Medical and Disaster Medicine. The course targeted professionals and managers in the field of medical countermeasures to emergencies involving chemical warfare agents and other toxic chemicals. The agenda included theoretical lectures and practical exercises, with intensive discussion of issues related to national and international responses and medical countermeasures to a chemical attack during a mass gathering event.

A complex field exercise focused on mitigating the consequences of a chemical attack was conducted on the final day of the course with more than 200 representatives of different Ukrainian emergency response units participating. The exercise covered all stages from the first response in the incident area to hospital treatment of the victims.

*Armenia, Belarus, China, Estonia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Poland, Serbia, Russia, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Yemen and USA (as a lecturer).

http://www.opcw.org/news/article/ course-on-emergency-medical-assistancefor-victims-of-chemical-incidents-held-inukraine/

Advance Assistance-and-Protection Course Held in China

May 24, 2012

The OPCW and Government of the People's Republic of China jointly organised an Advanced Assistance-and-Protection Course from 14 to 18 May 2012 at the Institute of Chemical Defence of the People's Liberation Army in Beijing. Experts from 19 States Parties* took part in the course, which related to Article X of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

The course participants belonged to national emergency-response agencies involved in dealing with chemical-related incidents. The course provided advanced training in the use of chemical protective equipment and in techniques of monitoring, detection and decontamination in response to attacks with chemical warfare agents, supplemented with table-top and field exercises.

Mr Leslie Gumbi, the OPCW Director of International Cooperation and Assistance, addressed the opening session of the course and held bilateral meetings with representatives of the Foreign Affairs and Defence ministries.

* Belarus, Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, India, Jamaica, Jordan, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mongolia, Mexico, Pakistan, Peru, Uganda, Uruguay, Vietnam, Yemen, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

http://www.opcw.org/news/article/ advance-assistance-and-protectioncourse-held-in-china/

OPCW Inspects 1000th OCPF Plant Site

March 15, 2012

OPCW inspectors have now inspected 1,000 different sites around the world of "Other Chemical Production Facilities" (OCPFs) as they are classed under Article VI of the Chemical Weapons Convention. The 1000th site inspection was conducted at an industrial plant in France.

OCPFs do not produce any of the three Schedules of chemicals listed in the Convention. They are subject to inspection because the configuration and complexity of their production processes enables them potentially to be converted for the manufacture of chemical weapons or related materials. Of the nearly 5,000 chemical plants sites globally that are inspectable by the OPCW, about 85% are currently OCPFs. Recognizing their importance to the Convention, the most recent Conference of the States Parties in December approved a plan to scale up the OPCW's annual number of industrial inspections from 209 in 2011, to 241 in 2014. All of the additional inspections will be OCPFs.

"This milestone is yet another demonstration of the shared commitment of the OPCW, its States Parties and the global chemical industry to ensuring that chemistry is only used for peaceful purposes," said OPCW Director-General Ahmet Üzümcü. "By increasing the number of OCPF inspections in the coming years, we will improve our capacity to verify compliance with the provisions of the Chemical Weapons Convention and thereby raise the level of confidence among all our stakeholders."

Toxic chemicals are used for a variety of peaceful purposes from making ink to producing pharmaceuticals. To allow for verification, States Parties declare legitimate activities involving scheduled chemicals (chemicals that have been used as warfare agents or to make such agents in the past). The OPCW verifies such declarations through a combination of data monitoring and on-site inspections without "undue intrusion into the State Party's chemical activities".

http://www.opcw.org/news/article/ opcw-inspects-1000th-ocpf-plant-site/

OPCW Inspectors Verify Newly Declared Chemical Weapons Materials in Libya

January 20, 2012

A team of OPCW inspectors visited Libya from 17 to 19 January 2012 to verify previously undisclosed chemical weapons that were discovered after the fall of the former regime. The new government in Tripoli announced the discovery last year and submitted a formal declaration of the weapons to the OPCW on 28 November.

The two-fold purpose of this inspection was to verify the new declaration in terms of types and quantities of chemical weapons, and to assist Libyan authorities in determining whether another set of discovered materials is declarable under the provisions of the Chemical Weapons Convention. The mission was carried out with the logistical support of the Federal Republic of Germany and the UN Department of Safety and Security, and with the full cooperation of Libyan authorities.

The OPCW inspectors verified the declared chemical weapons, which consist of sulfur mustard agent that is not loaded into munitions. At the same time, at the request of the Libyan authorities the inspectors examined munitions, mainly artillery shells, which they determined are chemical munitions and hence declarable.

All of the newly declared materials are stored at the Ruwagha depot in southeastern Libya, together with quantities of sulfur mustard and precursor chemicals that were declared by the Qaddafi government when Libya joined the OPCW in early 2004. The Qaddafi government succeeded in destroying 54% of its declared sulfur mustard and about 40% of the precursor chemicals before operations had to be suspended in February 2011 when the destruction facility malfunctioned.

Libya must now submit a detailed plan and completion date for destroying all of the declared materials to the OPCW not later than 29 April 2012, the date of the final extended deadline.

http://www.opcw.org/news/article/ opcw-inspectors-verify-newly-declaredchemical-weapons-materials-in-libya/

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

10th Regional Meeting of African National Authorities Held at African Union Complex in Ethiopia

June 01, 2012

The African Union and the OPCW co-hosted the 10th Regional Meeting of National Authorities of States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention in Africa at the new African Union Conference Complex in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia from 22 to 24 May 2012. The meeting was attended by 42 participants from 36 OPCW States Parties* together with permanent representatives and sub-regional institutions accredited to the African Union.

The opening ceremony featured an array of speakers including Mr El Ghassim Wane, AU Director for Peace and Security; Mr Leslie Gumbi, Director of the OPCW's International Cooperation and Assistance Division; and Brigadier General Dr Charles Norbert Muzanila, Director at Tanzania's Ministry of Defence and National Service and Chairperson of the Tanzanian National Authority.

The meeting was officially opened by Honourable Tadesse Haile, State Minister for Industry and Chairman of Ethiopia's National Authority, who delivered the keynote speech.

"Besides the priority given by OPCW to Africa in supporting and fostering international cooperation in areas of peaceful uses of chemistry, the (OPCW) is also delivering significant capacity building support in the region in areas of national implementation of the Convention," the Honourable Tadesse Haile stated. "The concerted efforts of the Organisation to respond to Africa's needs in this regard, is highly commendable." The 3-day meeting is an annual event that provides an opportunity for National Authorities to confer, network and share experiences, as well as consult with the Technical Secretariat of the OPCW on how best they can fulfil their obligations and receive the required assistance. It also serves as a forum for States Parties in the region to indicate which forms of assistance they can offer to other States Parties.

* Algeria, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, Comoros, Republic of the Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Libya, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

http://www.opcw.org/news/article/ 10th-regional-meeting-of-africannational-authorities-held-at-africanunion-complex-in-ethiopia/

Director-General Addresses Final Chemical Weapons Demilitarisation Conference in Scotland

May 22, 2012

OPCW Director-General Ahmet Üzümcü visited Glasgow on 21 and 22 May 2012 where he attended the 15th and final international Chemical Weapons Demilitarisation (CWD) Conference, hosted by the UK's Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl).

The CWD conferences have been held annually around the world since 1998. This year's final event marked the passing of the 29 April 2012 deadline for possessors of chemical weapons to eliminate their stockpiles, and celebrated the global progress in chemical weapons destruction. The conference attracted more than 170 delegates from 16 countries and featured more than 90 prominent speakers, including the UK Minister of State for Armed Forces, Mr Nick Harvey.

Discussions in the conference included a longterm review of the progress made by national CWD programmes, focusing on successes, lessons learned and an exchange of best practices. Participants also looked at explosive detonation technology - given that many countries' plans are now to acquire such equipment - as well as at chemical safety and security, recovery of chemical weapons from rivers and seas, and innovative technologies.

In his address to the conference, Director-General Üzümcü reported that nearly threequarters of all declared chemical weapons have now been destroyed under OPCW verification since entry into force of the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1997. Although this fell short of the final extended deadline, he said the decision of the States Parties on this issue fully preserved the integrity of the Convention and that the three concerned possessor states have submitted detailed plans to the OPCW for destroying their remaining arsenals, together with planned completion dates. In the specific case of Libya, he stated that a number of States Parties have considered providing assistance to enable the government to destroy its remaining stockpile, and that Canada has provided a large sum for this purpose under the Global Partnership Program.

The Director-General also reported that of the 70 former chemical weapons production facilities (CWPFs) that have been declared in total by 13 States Parties, 43 have been irreversibly destroyed and 21 converted for purposes not prohibited under the Convention. He added that all converted production facilities remain under systematic verification by the OPCW for a 10-year period following conversion to ensure they are fully consistent with the approved conversion requests.

http://www.opcw.org/news/article/ director-general-addresses-finalchemical-weapons-demilitarisationconference-in-scotland/

Canada Provides OPCW its Largest-Ever Donation to Expedite Destruction of Chemical Weapons in Libya

April 24, 2012

Canada has made a voluntary contribution to the OPCW of CAD 6 million (Euro 4.53 million) for the Organisation to support the Libyan Government's efforts in resuming and completing the destruction of its remaining stockpile of chemical weapons.

Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird first announced the offer of assistance in Tripoli last October, when he visited the city shortly before the end of the eight-month conflict which resulted in the fall of the Qadhafi regime. The donation is the largest the OPCW has ever received from a State Party since it was established in 1997.

"This historic donation reflects the spirit of solidarity and mutual aid that has exemplified the OPCW from its beginning, and which is vital to achieve our goal of ridding the world of all chemical weapons," said the OPCW Director-General, Ambassador Ahmet Üzümcü. "I commend the Government of Canada for its generous support, and we look forward to working closely with Libya to eliminate the last of its chemical weapons as soon as possible."

The Libyan authorities, in turn, highly appreciate the support provided by the Government of Canada to Libya in order to achieve its comprehensive programme for the disposal of chemical weapons.

OPCW will use the funds for three main activities: 1) Project management and training of personnel to operate the destruction facility, 2) purchase of equipment and related materials for destroying sulfur mustard agent and chemical weapons munitions stored at the Ruwagha depot, and 3) provision of support services for OPCW on-site inspectors at Ruwagha.

The OPCW will continuously maintain rotating teams of 5-6 inspectors at Ruwagha throughout the destruction process, which OPCW officials expect should be completed for Libya's Category 1 chemical weapons within 6 months after operations resume.

Libya is one of three States Parties, together with the Russian Federation and the United States, that are unable to meet the 29 April 2012 final extended deadline set by the Chemical Weapons Convention for completing the destruction of their declared chemical arsenals. By decision of the Conference of States Parties in December, the three countries must submit detailed destruction plans to the OPCW, with completion dates, by no later than the final extended deadline, and are subject to enhanced reporting and verification measures.

http://www.opcw.org/news/article/ canada-provides-opcw-its-largest-everdonation-to-expedite-destruction-ofchemical-weapons-in-libya/

Fears grow for fate of Syria's chemical weapons: by Jonathan Marcus

There are growing concerns - shared both in neighbouring countries and among key western governments - about the security of these weapons should the regime fall.

There are even persistent reports in the US that preparations are being made to secure such stocks in the event of a regime meltdown.

One aspect of the problem is the scale and scope of Syria's chemical weapons programme.

Leonard Spector, executive director of the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies based in Washington, notes that: "Syria has one of the world's largest chemical weapon arsenals, including traditional chemical agents, such as mustard, and more modern nerve agents, such as Sarin, and possibly persistent nerve agents, such as VX.

"Syria is thought to have a number of major chemical weapon complexes, some in areas of current conflict, such as the Homs and Hama regions. The bases are said to be guarded by elite forces, but whether they would stay at their posts if the Assad regime collapses cannot be predicted."

"Conceivably, the Assad government could use some of these agents against rebel forces or even civilians in an effort to intimidate them into submission" Leonard Spector James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies

An additional concern is the manner in which the different kinds of chemical weapons are stored.

Mr Spector notes that while the mustard agent is believed to be stored in bulk form,

rather than in individual munitions, other agents are thought to be in "binary" munitions, in which two innocuous solutions combine when the munition is fired to create the chemical warfare agent.

These might be more easily transported and used than the bulk agent.

Mr Spector adds: "US officials believe Syria's chemical arms are stored in secure bunkers at a limited number of sites and have not been dispersed into the field."

Beyond the intelligence services there is little hard and fast detail on Syria's chemical weapons programme.

Unlike Libya, which had signed the Chemical Weapons Convention and was in the process of dismantling its stocks when Muammar Gaddafi's regime collapsed, Syria has not joined the convention and thus has never made any formal declarations of its stocks.

Indeed as Charles Blair, a Senior Fellow at the Federation of American Scientists underlines, Libya is not a terribly useful precedent when considering the potential problems surrounding Syria's chemical arsenal.

Libya's arsenal was much smaller; stocks of mustard agent were essentially old; locations of stockpiles were known and the Libyan authorities were co-operating in their destruction.

Crucially too, says Mr Blair, there are huge differences in the two countries' potential abilities to deliver chemical weapons.

"Libya was able to deliver its sole CW agent via aerial bombs only - a militarily ineffective manner in this case," he says.

"Syria, by comparison, is thought to possess a variety of platforms for chemical weapons delivery - an open-source CIA report lists aerial bombs, artillery shells and ballistic missiles."

There is considerable discussion as to the nature of the threat Syria's weapons pose.

Leonard Spector says that there are multiple dangers.

"Conceivably, the Assad government could use some of these agents against rebel forces or even civilians in an effort to intimidate them into submission," he says.

"Or insurgents could overrun one of the chemical weapon sites and threaten to use some of these weapons, in extremis, if threatened with overwhelming force by the Syrian army."

The scenario that is causing the greatest concern, he says, is the possible loss of control over Syria's chemical arsenal leading to the transfer of chemical weapons to Hezbollah, in Southern Lebanon, or to al-Qaeda.

Special forces

Components of both organisations are now operating in Syria as one of the groups challenging the Assad regime, he says.

Such a link-up between al-Qaeda-affiliated groups and weapons of mass destruction has haunted US military planners for more than a decade.

In the face of such concerns there has been considerable pressure, not least from Washington, for the US to come up with plans to secure the Syrian weapons in the event of the collapse of the regime.

There has been a succession of press reports displaying various degrees of bravado suggesting US Special Forces are being readied to swoop in and take over Syria's chemical weapons infrastructure.

The reality is more complex. Such a mission would require significant numbers of "boots on the ground" in highly volatile circumstances.

As Charles Blair makes clear: "The Iraq experience demonstrates the difficulty of securing highly sensitive military storage facilities."

He argues that in Syria the challenges are likely to be greater "because no foreign army stands poised to enter the country to locate and secure chemical weapons manufacturing and storage facilities".

Of course, as Leonard Spector points out, details of US contingency planning are not known.

"The most desirable plan would be to urge the weapons' current custodians to remain in place during any transition of power, and to place the sites under the supervision of an international contingent that could monitor the weapons' security, as decisions were made about how to manage or destroy them in the future," he says.

However, he adds: "For the US to attempt to secure the sites in the face of armed resistance by Syrian forces would be extremely demanding, given the number of the sites involved and their considerable size."

Of course if the Assad regime were to go, a whole new set of issues emerges.

Would any new Syrian government agree to join the convention and agree to eliminate its chemical weapons stocks?

Or, as Leonard Spector notes, would they instead "insist on retaining them as a counter

to Israel's nuclear capabilities and as a bargaining chip in future negotiations with Israel over the Golan Heights?"

Source: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/ world-middle-east-18483788

Police probe anthrax sent to Pakistan PM: by Sajjad Tarakzai

Pakistani police said they were investigating how and why an envelope containing anthrax was sent to the prime minister's office in the capital Islamabad last year.

It appeared to be the first reported case of anthrax sent to the government in Pakistan, a nuclear-armed country of 174 million that is battling a Taliban insurgency and where Al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden was shot dead.

It was not immediately clear how toxic was the substance included in the package addressed to Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, who was responsible or how they could have accessed anthrax of any quality in Pakistan.

The case was registered on Tuesday, but according to the police report and a senior government official, the envelope was received last October.

"After the laboratory test confirmed that the parcel contained anthrax we registered a case against unknown people," police officer Hakim Khan said.

The senior government official said the Pakistan Council of Scientific and Industrial Research confirmed the package was "anthrax-infected" but offered no explanation for why it took months to register a case with police.

The police report, registered on Tuesday and seen by AFP, said an envelope addressed to

Gilani contained a smaller envelope with an unidentified "powder/chemical". It was received by his office on October 18.

Police refused to let AFP see the accompanying laboratory test results.

Khan said the parcel was posted from the Jamshoro district in southern province Sindh, the capital of which is Karachi — Pakistan's biggest city used by the United States to ship supplies to troops fighting in Afghanistan.

"We have sent a police team to investigate it and to find the culprits there," he told AFP.

But in Jamshoro, 180 kilometres (113 miles) northeast of Karachi, police said they had not been informed by Islamabad of any anthrax delivery, instead finding out through local media reports.

"We have not yet received any instructions from the government to investigate this matter," local police official Bashir Ahmed told AFP.

"We have asked the local post office protectively to check their records to know about the sender.

"We can't say how long it will take to complete the investigation. We expect a quick result if the sender's identity is not fake."

In November 2001, police arrested two men suspected of sending a letter containing anthrax to Pakistan's largest newspaper, Jang.

In the United States, anthrax mailings rattled a jittery American public just days after the September 11, 2001 attacks that killed almost 3,000 people.

US government scientist Bruce Ivins committed suicide in July 2008 as FBI

agents were about to bring charges against him over the anthrax campaign, which killed five people and injured 17.

Source: http://www.google.com/ hostednews/afp/article/ ALeqM5jKLkHBfhQGnuS nrT9nND52hTHJkg?docId=CNG.744bcb7e355 08b7ab0945c9f1f64aa72.3a1

The Taliban's unconventional tactics: the use of chlorine bleach

According to very recent reports from Afghanistan, the Taliban may have retaliated for the Koran burning against the US-run Bagram Air Field, by poisoning food at the military Torkham Forward Operation Base near the Pakistan border in the Nangarhar province. The actual situation is not completely clear, but NATO announced that traces of chlorine bleach were found in fruit and coffee delivered for consumption by military personnel, and the Taliban hastened to claim responsibility for that.

http://www.ibconsultancy.eu/
publications/cer-update/

DEVELOPMENT IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Bio-security, an emerging challenge: by Bhaskar Balakrishnan

Freedom to research in biotechnology shouldn't be hampered, but the risks must be dealt with.

Advancements in biotechnology can be used to alarmingly destructive effect.

Recently, in September 2011, researchers in Rotterdam succeeded in modifying the avian flu virus in ferrets (the best animal model for influenza in humans) to make it capable of airborne transmission, and therefore, making it far more contagious. The implications are that the highlydangerous A(H5N1) avian flu virus, which so far spreads only from birds to humans, could get modified fairly easily, to enable it to spread by airborne transmission from human to human, making it far more dangerous. The A(H5N1) avian flu has caused around 350 deaths from 600 reported cases so far, giving it a mortality rate of around 60 per cent.

Advances in Biotech

Recent research indicates that developments in biotechnology have now made it quite feasible to modify a wide range of pathogens to give them new features, including those that can make them far more dangerous to humans. A number of new diseases have emerged in recent years, adding to the list of existing pathogens and toxins that are dangerous to humans.

In the recent case, the research journals concerned were asked by US agencies to not publish key details of their work on the precise nature of changes to the A(H5N1) virus, due to the apprehension that such information may be misused bv unscrupulous elements. While the request has been acceded to, it has kicked off a debate in the scientific community on the general question of disclosure of certain research details in biosciences, which could be used by terrorists and some others against human populations, and the possible role of WHO in this regard.

The Biological Weapons Convention, 1972, which has 165 countries party to it, embodies the determination of the international community to ban biological and toxin weapons. Such weapons have, for long, been regarded as being relatively less effective for military use.

However, the convention is wanting in the area of verification. The US, which is the

global leader in biotechnology, has stalled progress in this area, due to concerns regarding leakage of scientific information. This may now change. However, while the convention applies to governments, it leaves open the possibility of non-state actors attempting to use bio-weapons.

Unlike nuclear weapons technology, biotechnology is relatively accessible and far less costly to use. For example, the cost of gene sequencing has dropped dramatically with technology advances. Biotech research can be done at a relatively low cost compared to nuclear technology. Harmful pathogens can be easily transported and released to cause disease and panic.

So, this technology offers non-state actors a potential low-cost, high-impact instrument to cause damage to human populations, or to the agricultural sector of target countries. The accidental release of dangerous pathogens from research facilities is another possibility.

Indeed, reports have already surfaced of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) seeking to produce a deadly toxin, Ricin, from the waste left after extracting castor oil. What if pathogens like avian flu A(H5N1), plague, SARS, etc. are deliberately modified to enable airborne transmission from humans to humans? This possibility can no longer be dismissed as science fiction.

Action is needed at the national and international levels to deal with this threat. Biotech research is conducted in a wide range of institutions, in government laboratories, universities, and by the private sector. Freedom to do research in biotechnology shouldn't be hampered, and intellectual property rights must be protected. However, the risks to society and the general population must be dealt with, as in the case of nuclear research. This presents a formidable challenge to national regulatory agencies and governments in devising suitable frameworks to enhance bio-security and biosafety, while allowing research to go ahead. Developing countries shouldn't face additional hurdles in access to biotechnology and its useful applications.

India should be actively engaged in international efforts and adopt national measures to strengthen bio-safety and biosecurity. Otherwise, institutions and researchers in India are likely to face problems in entering into technology collaborations and research activities in biotechnology.

Regulatory Agency

India is still to set up a National Biotechnology Regulatory Agency, as a single professional entity to deal with all aspects of biotech research and applications.

A Bill on this subject, prepared in 2008, was finally tabled in Parliament in December 2011. This Bill needs to be revisited, to take into account the issue of bio-security and regulation of research activities, to prevent potentially dangerous information going into the wrong hands. This is a delicate issue, and needs to be dealt with in consultation with all stakeholders — research community, academics, and the private sector.

Research institutions should devote more attention to security aspects, such as personnel security, security of materials and equipment, and security of information and data. Suppliers of biotech equipment and consumables may need to take more care and verify end-user details while responding to requests for equipment and materials that could be used for harmful ends. In the area of response to bio-threats, the actions needed are similar to those for combating disease outbreaks. Rapid response should include national and international coordination to instantly identify and determine the genetic makeup of the responsible pathogen, and evolve counter measures. The WHO's Global Outbreak and Response Network (GOARN) has functioned well and could be further strengthened.

On the international level, more teeth have to be given to the BWC. Verification provisions should be strengthened, and the role of national entities more precisely defined. A model code of conduct and rules for biotech institutions and national agencies could be useful. The Chemical Weapons Convention could provide a useful model in this regard. The threat from bioterrorism just got more likely than nuclear terrorism, and needs an effective response.

Source: http://www.thehindubusinessline. com/opinion/article2834528.ece? homepage=true

Dutch Scientist Agrees to Omit Published Details of Highly Contagious Bird Flu Findings: by Mikaela Conley

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The virologist who created a potentially dangerous, mutant strain of the deadly bird flu virus has agreed to omit methodology details from his published reports on the new strain. The decision came after the U.S. government warned Tuesday that published details of the experiment could be used to create a biological warfare weapon.

Ron Fouchier of Erasmus Medical Center in Rotterdam, Netherlands, said he created the contagious form of the deadly H5N1 bird flu strain "easily" by mutating a few genes within the strain. Officials feared the virus could kill millions if it were unleashed.

The study results were to be published in the U.S. journal Science, but in an unprecedented move, the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity, an independent committee that advises the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and other federal agencies, recommended against full publication after it determined the risks outweighed the benefit.

"Due to the importance of the findings to the public health and research communities, the NSABB recommended that the general conclusions highlighting the novel outcome be published, but that the manuscripts not include the methodological and other details that could enable replication of the experiments by those who would seek to do harm," the committee said in a statement Tuesday.

"The researchers have reservations about this recommendation but will observe it," the Erasmus Medical Center said Wednesday in a statement.

Fouchier said that he hoped his research would assist in developing better vaccines and treatments for influenza in the future. He conducted his research on ferrets, whose immune response to influenza is similar to that of humans.

"We know which mutation to watch for in the case of an outbreak, and we can then stop the outbreak before it is too late," Fouchier said in a statement Tuesday on the medical center's website. "Furthermore, the finding will help in the timely development of vaccinations and medication."

The Erasmus Medical Center press office and the National Institutes of Health, which

funded the research, said in statements that the researchers are currently working on a new report that complies with the feds' recommendations before it is published in scientific journals.

Since it appeared in 1996, H5N1 has killed hundreds of millions of birds, but transmission to humans has been rare. There have been about 600 confirmed cases of infections in people, most who worked directly with poultry. While rare, it is a deadly human disease. About 60 percent of those who had confirmed cases of the virus died.

Up until now, experts believed that the strain was transmissible from person-to-person only through very close contact, but Fouchier mutated the strain, creating an airborne virus that could be easily transmitted through coughs and sneezes.

In a written statement, Science's editor-inchief Bruce Alberts said that the journal was taking the NSABB's request for an abbreviated version of Fouchier's research "very seriously."

While Alberts said that the journal strongly supported the work of the NSABB, Alberts and the journal's editors have "concerns about withholding potentially important public-health information from responsible influenza researchers. Many scientists within the influenza community have a bona fide need to know the details of this research in order to protect the public, especially if they currently are working with related strains of the virus."

Experts contacted by ABCNews.com were split on whether the research should be published in full. While most virologists believe in noncensorship for the good of public health, some talked about the potential danger of releasing information on a virus that was so easily mutated. "The idea that biosecurity consists in policing scientists or chimerical "bioterrorists" is dangerous nonsense," said Philip Alcabes, a professor in the CUNY School of Public Health at Hunter College. "Who knows what the motives of the self-professed biosecurity experts really are, but in practice, their ridiculous pronouncements promote vast expenditures of taxpayer monies that achieve little outside of propping up the very biosecurity industry from which the warnings come."

"Censorship offends me, particularly in science," said John Barry, author of "The Great Influenza." "Nonetheless, I think there should be review of something like this ... but not necessarily by the government. It should be done by people who respect scientific openness, and publishing should be the default position."

Others, including Nicole Baumgarth, a professor in the department of pathology, microbiology and immunology at the University of California at Davis, said NIH scientists were in an "excellent position" to review the science and make recommendations, and discussion of whether to publish such data was necessary.

"I do think [the research] might help us to identify which mutations in influenza might cause outbreaks," said Baumgarth. "This could be of importance as the NIH and other organizations supporting the screening and sequencing of influenza viruses from birds and other species, as a means to screen what might become the next pandemic."

At least one other laboratory in Japan has reportedly conducted similar research and found similar results. Because of this, Baumgarth said, "it is really important to report on the research progress made, but maybe withhold the details of the exact mutations. At least that would prevent copycat science. "But let's face it," she said. "If two research labs have done this already, nobody is going to stop a third and fourth lab from doing the same. These are routine procedures done in many labs around the world."

Dr. William Schaffner, chairman of preventive medicine at Vanderbilt School of Medicine, said Fouchier's research is "illuminating" in helping to understand what aspects of the virus's genome can be changed to make it easily transmissible. Instead of worrying about biological warfare, Schaffner said the greater danger was the potential for the virus to escape from the university research laboratory, where it is reportedly being held under lock and key.

"A biowarfare threat of influenza is very low because the virus cannot be controlled once it is let out into the community," said Schaffner. "There are other biological warfare weapons that are much better at targeting specific populations. More importantly, people in that lab need to have a careful discussion on how to keep that virus in the lab secure. Viral escape is quite real. They should take extra care in handling it."

Source: http://abcnews.go.com/Health/ dutch-scientist-agrees-omit-details-killerbird-flu/story?id=15204649& page=2#.T8XMjrBzVOU