

Chemical and Biological News

Fentanyl is a Dangerous Drug, Not a Weapon of War

16 June 2023

Calls by the US to add fentanyl to the Chemical Weapons Convention have politicized arms control and undermined efforts to curb chemical warfare.

With all the bizarre, partisan proposals circulating in Washington, DC, it takes a lot to elicit surprise: Enter the Project Precursor Act. This Republican Party-led Act would require the Biden administration to use its voice, vote, and influence to designate fentanyl as a “chemical weapon” under the Chemical Weapons Convention. What elevates it beyond the ridiculous to dangerous is that Congressional Democrats seem to be complacently nodding along.

The Bill claims to interrupt the fentanyl trade and protect Americans from its dangers. Fentanyl is one of the most severe threats to communities across the United States, and it deserves a powerful, whole-of-government response. Unfortunately, the Project Precursor Act is little more than an ill-conceived exercise in political posturing.

Politicizing Arms Control

In his statement introducing the Bill, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul (R-TX) made a powerful case that fentanyl’s impact is similar to that of a weapon of mass destruction. But he seems to have forgotten that he is dealing in metaphors. Rather than outline a thoughtful, targeted strategy to manage a serious public health crisis, the GOP leadership is opting to undercut a landmark arms control treaty that is a vital tool for preventing literal chemical attacks.

Such attacks are rare primarily because of the success of the Chemical Weapons Convention, one of the most effective arms control agreements in history. After chemical weapons killed 1.3 million soldiers in the First World War and millions of people at Nazi extermination camps, there have been only a handful of documented uses of chemical weapons since the end of the Second World War. In many ways, war has become more brutal for civilians, and the law of war has become increasingly contested, but the taboo of chemical weapons remains universally respected.

US’s advocacy for adding fentanyl to the Chemical Weapons Convention is not only a slippery slope towards more politicization of arms control but also towards actual conflict.

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which implements the Treaty, has overseen the destruction of over 99 per cent of the declared chemical weapons stockpiles. It won the 2013 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts. But it’s not suited to monitor controlled substances. Asking it to do so would only divert resources from its core mission and invite similar bad-faith, politically motivated efforts from other governments.

Past presidents have proposed the use of military force to eliminate or deter the use of chemical weapons, with or without Congressional authorization.

There is no margin for loose talk on these subjects in light of Republican proposals to take an increasingly militarized approach to problems with Mexico. Two members of Congress have introduced legislation to authorize the use of military force against the cartels, an approach proposed by President

Donald Trump while he was in office. In looking to appear tough on fentanyl, Congressional action today may have consequences for communities in Mexico and service members in the United States in the future. Even if the Project Precursor Act never becomes law, having the House on record naming fentanyl as a chemical weapon could be cited in a legal argument for military action in the future. This is a risk we should not take.

A group of civil society organizations with missions ranging from drug policy to peace to international human rights, are asking members of Congress to oppose the Bill. But so far, Congressional Democrats have not voiced their opposition in the face of this reckless stunt. Facing a series of votes on hawkish measures that take a military-first approach to a variety of multidimensional challenges, some appear concerned that voting no on all of them would negatively impact their electoral prospects. Rather than confront this farce head-on, these members of Congress seem dead-set on finding their way to yes on something, no matter how preposterous the substance is.

<https://inkstickmedia.com/fentanyl-is-a-dangerous-drug-not-a-weapon-of-war/>

UN Investigative Team Outlines Findings Around ISIL Chemical Weapons Use

8 June 2023

Senior officials with the Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD), presented some of their findings to a Member States meeting at the UN Headquarters in New York.

For the past five years, UNITAD has been gathering evidence of crimes committed during ISIL's self-proclaimed Caliphate from

June 2014 to December 2017, which could be used to prosecute the extremists in national or foreign courts.

Prosecution is rare

Christian Ritscher, Special Adviser and Head of UNITAD, recalled that chemical weapons use is outlawed internationally and could constitute a crime against humanity, war crime or even contribute to genocide, if a specific group is targeted.

“To the best of my knowledge, the use of chemical weapons by non-State actors has rarely been adjudicated, if at all, in any court – whether national or international – around the world. As UNITAD, we would like to play our part and aim to change this,” he said.

The investigations into ISIL's development and use of chemical and biological weapons began two years ago, looking into the March 2016 attack on the town of Taza Khurmatu and whether other incidents had taken place elsewhere.

Team Leader Paula Silfverstolpe said ISIL's operations represent the culmination of nearly two decades of experimentation by Sunni jihadi groups, marking “the most sophisticated programme developed by non-State actors so far”.

The overall manufacturing of weapons and ammunition fell under ISIL's self-styled Department of Defence, specifically the Committee of Military Development and Manufacturing (CMDM), which had a monthly budget of over a \$1 million as well as extra-budgetary funds to purchase raw materials.

More than 1,000 combatants were involved in production, according to ISIL payroll records.

Hundreds of individuals were deployed to the chemical weapons programme, and specific job advertisements were placed to recruit scientists and technical experts, including from abroad, drawing people from countries such as the United States, France, the United Kingdom and Belgium.

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1137492>

Western Powers Considering Action on Russia over its Chemical Weapon Use: US Ambassador to OPCW

The Hague, Netherlands. Edited By: Moohita Kaur Garg Updated: 23 May 2023, 09:

Western nations, as per the US Ambassador to the global chemical weapons body, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) are looking at taking measures against Russia over its alleged nerve agent attacks.

As per AFP, tensions at the OPCW have soared since the global chemical weapons body's investigators found that Novichok, a Soviet-era nerve agent, was used against Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny in 2020. The nerve agent was also found to have been used against a former Russian spy in England in 2018.

Speaking to AFP on Monday, US envoy Joseph Manso said that "the United States and many countries are concerned about Russian non-compliance, and Russian non-compliance is at the heart of the problems at the OPCW."

"We're going to keep looking for what the right tools are to bring Russia into compliance. It is not something we're going to forget about," he added.

Manso accused Moscow of being responsible for the recent failure of the OPCW to agree on a new five-year plan and said that Russia's non-compliance lies at the core of the problems within the OPCW.

During the recent OPCW meeting held in May 2023 Russia accused the West of "politicising" the Organisation. The five-yearly meeting was held to assess progress on a 1997 agreement to eradicate chemical weapons.

The meeting failed to agree on a final document that would have set out its priorities for the next five years.

<https://www.wionews.com/world/western-powers-considering-action-on-russia-over-its-chemical-weapon-use-us-ambassador-to-opcw-595272>

OPCW Fifth Review Conference opens 15 May 2023

OPCW Member States meet to evaluate the Convention's implementation status and set out priorities for the Organisation for the upcoming years.

The Fifth Session of the Review Conference of the States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention (RC-5) opened at The Hague, the Netherlands. The session is livestreamed here.

The Conference of the States Parties/ convenes in a special session called the Review Conference (RC) every five years to examine the Chemical Weapons Convention's (CWC) operation. The RC evaluates the Convention's implementation status and sets out priorities for the OPCW for the upcoming years. It provides strategic direction for the Organisation and ensures that it has adequate resources to deliver on all its core objectives, taking into account any

relevant scientific and technological developments./

Some of the topics discussed during the week-long Conference were the role of the OPCW and the CWC in strengthening international peace and security, including preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons; maintaining readiness to respond to use or threats of use of chemical weapons; developments in science and technology relevant to the Convention's implementation; promoting authorised and peaceful applications of chemistry and ensuring safe production and secure use of chemicals.

“The OPCW is on a firm path ahead, spurred by a 26-year legacy of successful implementation of the Chemical Weapons Convention. We take pride in this legacy with a sense of responsibility. It compels us to learn from the past to update our knowledge and skills, as the future is already here. At present we work in a global security context that is notably different from the one at the entry into force of the Convention in 1997,” said OPCW Director-General, Ambassador Fernando Arias, at the opening of the Conference. “Today, the ban against the use of chemical weapons is permanent and incontestable. And the Convention is nearly universal.”

“Over the past 26 years, the robust verification method of the Organisation has generated confidence in compliance with the Convention. It has set a gold standard among multilateral disarmament agreements. To maintain this high level, the tools for verification must evolve in line with advances in science and technology,” he added.

“In this sense, we developed the project for the construction of the Centre for Chemistry and Technology (CCT), which was

inaugurated last Friday, 12 May 2023, in the presence of His Majesty King Willem Alexander of The Netherlands. The CCT will significantly enhance the operational and capacity-building capabilities of the Organisation. At the Fourth Review Conference in November 2018, it was just an idea. Today, thanks to the generous contributions of 57 countries, the European Union, and other donors, we have a modern platform for facilitating our activities related to research, analysis, training, information exchange, and capacity building,” the Director-General emphasised.

<https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2023/05/opcw-fifth-review-conference-opened-today>

OPCW Centre for Chemistry and Technology Officially Inaugurated

12 May 2023

The Centre will strengthen the capabilities of OPCW and its Member States to implement the Chemical Weapons Convention

In the presence of His Majesty King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands the new Centre for Chemistry and Technology (ChemTech Centre) of the Organisation for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), was inaugurated in Pijnacker-Nootdorp, Netherlands today.

During the ceremony, His Majesty the King unveiled a plaque to mark the official inauguration of the Centre and was given a guided tour of the facilities.

“The ChemTech Centre is a success of multilateral diplomacy and a tangible symbol of what the international community can achieve together for the benefit of global peace and security. It is a privilege and

honour that the Centre is being inaugurated in the presence of His Majesty King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands,” the Director-General said in his opening remarks. “I thank the 57 donor countries, and other donors, including the European Union and the members of the “Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction” for their strong political and financial support to make this Centre a reality. We will leave a special legacy to future generations in the common interest of peace and security.”

Speaking on behalf of the OPCW’s host country, H.E. Mr Paul Huijts, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, stated: “It is a great honour to participate in the inauguration ceremony of the ChemTech Centre. As Host Nation to and Member State of the OPCW, the Netherlands is strongly committed to upholding the global norm against the use of chemical weapons. It is our firm belief that all Member States will benefit from the new and exciting opportunities the ChemTech Centre has to offer and that it will greatly contribute to further bolster its international role, particularly in disarmament, verification and cooperation.”

The ChemTech Centre is an important upgrade to the OPCW’s capabilities to adapt to the evolving global security landscape and assisting Member States in upholding the global norm against chemical weapons. It will ensure that the Organisation remains able to address threats and opportunities arising from rapid progress in science and technology.

<https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2023/05/opcw-centre-chemistry-and-technology-officially-inaugurated>

Ukraine Using Chemical Weapons, Russian Journalist Claims

11 May 2023

Banned substances were reportedly deployed in Zaporozhye Region

Ukrainian forces have used chemical weapons that caused loss of consciousness after inhalation, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* correspondent Alexander Kots reported on Thursday, citing sources in the Russian military. The alleged attack happened near Orehov, in Zaporozhye Region.

The use of substances banned by international Conventions appears to be part of the much-anticipated Ukrainian offensive, the journalist wrote on Telegram.

According to Kots, Western-supplied tanks have been spotted outside of Kharkov, while Ukrainian troops have launched attacks on Russian positions north and south of Artyomovsk, which they call Bakhmut.

On Thursday evening, the Russian Defence Ministry said there were, “no active operations” on the Zaporozhye front, and that the “general situation in the area of the special military operation is under control.”

Multiple Western officials have said over the past week that all the weapons, ammunition and supplies required for Ukraine’s grand counter-offensive had already been delivered. On Thursday, the UK confirmed it had supplied Kiev with long-range ‘Storm Shadow’ missiles.

Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky, however, claimed he needed more time and more armoured vehicles before he could launch the assault, in order to avoid casualties. In the same interview, Zelensky

claimed Ukraine had nothing to do with the drones that attacked the Kremlin last week.

According to US presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr., whose son had volunteered on Kiev's side for several months last year, Ukraine has suffered around 300,000 military casualties and is taking losses at a far higher rate than Russia.

Donetsk People's Republic authorities had accused Ukrainian troops of dropping chemical weapons from drones back in February, pointing to frontline reports and videos shared by Ukrainians on social media.

<https://www.rt.com/russia/576138-ukraine-chemical-weapons/>

US Making 'Bioweapons Components' in Ukraine – Moscow

11 April 2023

The US is using Ukraine to manufacture components for biological weapons, the Commander of Russia's Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Defence Forces told the State Duma on Tuesday. Lieutenant General Igor Kirillov says the Russian military found ample evidence of this in Donetsk, Lugansk and Kherson.

"We have no doubt that the US, under the guise of ensuring global biosecurity, conducted dual-use research, including the creation of biological weapons components, in close proximity to Russian borders," Kirillov told lawmakers.

He said the military has come to this conclusion after interviewing multiple eyewitnesses and going over some 2,000 pages of documentation found in Kherson Region and the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics. The investigation also involved a parliamentary task force and federal law enforcement.

Moscow raised concerns over a network of secretive US-funded laboratories in Ukraine in the early weeks of the conflict, and has frequently made public evidence about the programme ever since. The US Government confirmed the existence of the labs in March 2022, but insisted they were neither illegal nor intended for a military purpose, despite the fact that much of their funding went through The Pentagon.

According to Kirillov, the investigation has identified specific individuals involved in the military bio-research in the territory of the US and Ukraine. He also noted that the facts made public by the Russian Defence Ministry have not been disputed.

"No one, including Western countries, has had any doubts about the authenticity of the published documents," the General said.

Moscow took the bio-labs issue to the UN last October, requesting an international probe, but the motion was blocked by the US, UK, and France in the Security Council.

The programme in Ukraine was previously known as 'Joint biological research' but has since been rebranded as 'Biological control research', according to documents Kirillov presented in the first week of April 2023. The US has blamed an alleged "Russian disinformation campaign" for the increased public scrutiny of the bio labs.

<https://www.rt.com/russia/574555-ukraine-biolabs-weapons-military/>

US Resumes Bio labs Programme in Ukraine – Russian MoD

7 April 2023

Washington is constructing secretive new facilities and is training personnel, Moscow has claimed

The US has quietly resumed its controversial bio labs programme in Ukraine and is focusing on the construction of secretive new facilities and the training of personnel, the Russian Defence Ministry has claimed.

A new trove of documents on alleged US-funded biological programmes in Ukraine was presented by the Commander of Russia's Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Defence Forces, Lieutenant General Igor Kirillov, during a media briefing on Friday.

The US has engaged in damage control efforts to prevent potential leaks from Ukrainian specialists on the true nature of the biological research programmes, Kirillov asserted.

<https://www.rt.com/russia/574362-us-ukraine-biolabs-program/>

Qatar Builds Asia's Capacity in Chemical Safety and Security Management

30 March 2023

Seminar contributes to addressing emerging threats and increasing safety and preparedness in chemical industry

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and Qatar's National Committee for Prohibition of Weapons (NCPW) jointly hosted a seminar on the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and Chemical Safety and Security Management for Asian Member States from 19 to 21 March 2023 in Doha, Qatar.

In his opening remarks, Brigadier General Abdulaziz Salmeen Aljabri, Chairman of the NCPW, highlighted the importance of chemical safety and security management, a key element related to the implementation of the CWC's Article XI.

"Ensuring chemical safety and security management requires interaction across different sectors, including academia and industry," he added.

The Head of OPCW's International Cooperation Branch expressed gratitude to Qatar for its continuous support to the Organisation and gave updates on the OPCW Centre for Chemistry and Technology (ChemTech Centre) which will significantly enhance the Organisation's capabilities to rid the world of chemical weapons and provide further capacity-building opportunities for Member States.

The seminar, fully funded by Qatar, contributes to Asian Member States' capacity in various aspects of chemical safety and security management, including new technologies as well as tackling emerging threats to the chemical industry, such as cybersecurity and drone attacks.

Since 2011, the Doha Workshop has been one of the long-standing courses on chemical safety and security management funded by Qatar to support Asian Member States' chemical emergency preparedness.

The seminar was attended by 26 international participants (20 of whom received financial support to attend the event) from 18 OPCW Member States (Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Laos, Lebanon, Malaysia, Micronesia, Myanmar, Nepal, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Vietnam) as well as a number of local participants from Qatar.

<https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2023/03/qatar-builds-asias-capacity-chemical-safety-and-security-management>

Expanding the Australia Group's Chemical Weapons Precursors Control List with a Family-Based Approach

Stefano Costanzi • Gregory D. Koblenz • Richard Cupitt

20 March 2023

The Australia Group (AG) is a forum of like-minded States seeking to harmonize export controls to prevent the proliferation of chemical and biological weapons. The AG Chemical Weapons Precursors list features dual-use chemicals that can be used as precursors for the synthesis of chemical weapons, all individually enumerated. This is in contrast to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) Schedules, which, alongside entries describing discrete chemicals, also include entries that describe families of chemicals.

By using families of chemicals, the CWC achieves the objective of covering with a single entry, a wide array of related chemicals of concern, including chemicals that have not yet been made. There are practical reasons why the AG Chemical Weapons Precursors list is exclusively based on the enumeration of individual chemicals. A cheminformatics tool, of which we have developed a prototype, the Nonproliferation Compliance Cheminformatics Tool (NCCT), has the potential to enable export control officers to handle control lists that contain families of chemicals. Thus, it opens the way to expand the AG Chemical Weapons Precursors list to a family-based approach for some of its entries. Such a change would result in a closer alignment of the chemical space covered by the AG Chemical Weapons Precursors list with that covered by the CWC

Schedules, thus closing loopholes that could be exploited by proliferators.

https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Costanzi_et_al_Pure_and_Applied_Chemistry_2023.pdf

There's a New US National Security Obsession — Biotech

Chris Miller, 6 March 2023

The ability to apply massive computing power to DNA is causing concern over biological warfare

Biotechnology has quietly become America's newest national security concern. From Congress to the intelligence agencies, Washington's leaders have concluded that control over biotechnologies will be critical not only to the country's health, but to national security as well. Biotech tools have made rapid advances of late, enabling new therapies, vaccines, manufacturing techniques — and biosecurity risks. It has long been recognised that DNA is just a complex code, telling cells how to operate. Gene-editing technologies have become more precise and vastly cheaper, making it easier than ever to “re-programme” organisms. In addition, more powerful computing capabilities have provided new clarity into the meaning of DNA's “code”; one use of these capabilities is for manufacturing. For centuries, humans have relied on micro-organisms to produce beer and yoghurt, but with the right reprogramming, bacteria can be made to produce many new types of chemicals. In 2010, DARPA, the Pentagon's long-range R&D arm, launched a programme called Living Foundries, aiming to synthetically manufacture 1,000 molecules. While there are many potential civilian uses of bio-manufacturing, the US military has

been a critical early investor. Living Foundries, for example, has already produced new fuels for missiles, which can be more perfectly tuned to the needs of missile engines than traditional fuel refining allows. The supply chain is simpler, too, with yeast (which manufactures the fuel) and sugar (which feeds the yeast) the two main ingredients. DARPA-supported researchers have also used microbes to produce antibiotics, pesticides, detergents, drug ingredients and liquid crystals. A key driver of these advances is the application of huge volumes of computing power to DNA. Guess-and-check was a slow research method; deep-learning systems like Google's Deep Mind are far faster, as the company's AlphaFold protein-structure prediction tool demonstrates. Due to this, access to genetic data will be a critical resource. BGI, the Beijing-based firm, has gathered a vast trove of data, using products like prenatal tests and COVID-19 swabs, which are sold globally, to perk up genetic data.

<https://www.ft.com/content/cb9cd845-e9b0-4243-97f3-c315dac11fb4>

The UK Must Prepare for the Biosecurity Threats to Come

Sophie Rose, 19 February 2023

Malign intent, human error and the evolution of viruses present us with heightened risks.

We need to get serious about biosecurity — and quickly. Biological risks have evolved dramatically in a short time, and governments need to act, both at home and together. Advances in biotechnology have potentially made it easier to create or modify deadly pathogens, lowering the barriers for adversarial States and extremist organisations to develop biological weapons. Referring to the 2018 novichok attack in Salisbury, the UK's integrated review has

warned of a “realistic possibility” that terrorists will launch a successful chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear attack by 2030.

Meanwhile, high containment laboratories proliferate around the world as life science research expands, increasing the likelihood of an accident involving dangerous pathogens. And as we have learnt, naturally occurring outbreaks could become future pandemics, even more transmissible or deadly than COVID-19. Whether through maligned intent, human error or the evolution of viruses, we now face a range of threats. Biosecurity needs to keep those charged with protecting our safety, up at night. The US has begun to recognise the risks. At the end of last year, the Prevent Pandemics Act was passed to bolster the country's preparedness.

The bipartisan legislation promises to enhance detection capabilities, bolster supply chains and accelerate medical counter-measure development. Senator Patty Murray, who tabled the legislation, told Congress that “we are taking action so we never go through a crisis like this again”. An Office of Pandemic Preparedness and Response Policy will be responsible for mitigation of biological threats across the Federal Government. The new unit will implement the national biodefence strategy, which includes developing early warning capabilities and investing in emerging technologies to deter State and non-State actors from developing biological weapons. Signalling the scale of the ambition, the strategy seeks \$88 billion of funding over five years.

In the UK, officials in the Cabinet Office's National Security Secretariat are finalising a refresh of the 2018 National Biological Security Strategy. While that plan recognised the range of biological risks the country faces,

it provided few details on implementation or resources. Without clear accountability and sufficient funds, it is perhaps no surprise that by the COVID-19 outbreak some 18 months later, the UK wasn't nearly as well prepared as it should have been. The new strategy is our best shot at rectifying this. It must include an implementation plan identifying who will tackle each risk, with a timeline for delivery. And its commitments must be properly funded. These are financially constrained times, but the £376 billion cost of the pandemic in the UK shows the eye-watering consequences of failing to invest. The recent national resilience framework is at least one heartening sign that the Government is starting to recognise the imperative of defence against extreme risks.

Finally, the UK needs to act in concert with others around the world to counter the risk of biological threats of every origin. The UK leads the world in metagenomic sequencing – this could offer the possibility of detecting new pathogens at the very beginning of an outbreak. We should pioneer the creation of an interconnected early warning system at home and through artful diplomacy, drive development of a global system to sound the alarm on potential pandemics. With a new cabinet facing so many challenges, ruthless prioritisation is needed to safeguard the UK's economic well-being and national security. Biosecurity needs to be up there – delivered through an ambitious strategy and dogged implementation of its recommendations.

<https://www.ft.com/content/b89d51c4-d148-4565-b9f1-48b1073504f1>

South Sudan becomes the 185th State Party to the Biological Weapons Convention

15 February 2023

The Parliamentarians for Global Action's (PGA) International Peace and Security

Programme was very pleased to be informed that South Sudan has deposited its Instrument of Accession to the Biological Weapons Convention on 15 February 2023.

PGA congratulates the Government of South Sudan on the occasion of the deposit of its Instrument of Accession to the BWC and expresses the sincere hope that this achievement may also serve to inspire, directly or indirectly, the taking of steps needed to restore peace and security at the national level.

The PGA would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the many different important contributions made by PGA members, Hon. Alma Yak and Hon. Stanslaus Jada since 2018 and also, more recently, by Amb. Joshua Franco Paul of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, leading to this milestone event.

The PGA also recognizes the important contributions made by certain other key stakeholders, including, most notably, by the BWC's Implementation Support Unit, as well as regional organizations and several UN Member States

<https://www.pgaction.org/news/south-sudan-bwc-accession.html>

OPCW Releases Third Report by Investigation and Identification Team

27 January 2023

The OPCW Investigation and Identification Team (IIT)'s third report concludes that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the Syrian Arab Air Forces were the perpetrators of the chemical weapons attack on 7 April 2018 in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic.

Based on the holistic assessment of the large volume and wide range of evidence gathered

and analysed, and on the convergence of the outcomes of such corroborated multiple analyses, the IIT concluded that, on the evening of 7 April 2018, at least one helicopter of the Syrian “Tiger Forces’ “ Elite Unit dropped two yellow cylinders containing toxic chlorine gas on two apartment buildings in a civilian area in Douma, killing 43 named individuals and affecting dozens more.

“The use of chemical weapons in Douma – and anywhere – is unacceptable and a breach of international law,” said OPCW Director-General Ambassador Fernando Arias.

“The Chemical Weapons Convention was signed 30 years ago – it represents a legally binding commitment of 193 States Parties to ban chemical weapons completely. OPCW’s Technical Secretariat was given a mandate by the Conference of the States Parties in June 2018 to identify the perpetrators of chemical weapons use in Syria. This report delivers on that mandate.”

The IIT assessed physical evidence collected and provided by OPCW experts, States Parties, and other entities. This includes 70 environmental and biomedical samples, 66 witness statements, and other verified data, such as forensic analysis, satellite images, gas dispersion modelling, and trajectory simulations. The evidence was scrutinised by IIT investigators, analysts, and several external independent experts.

The IIT considered a range of possible scenarios and tested their validity against the evidence they gathered and analysed to reach their conclusion: that the Syrian Arab Air Forces are the perpetrators of this attack.

The conclusion of the report is reached on the basis of “reasonable grounds”, which is the standard of proof consistently adopted

by international fact-finding bodies and commissions of inquiry. The IIT conducted its investigation between January 2021 and December 2022.

<https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2023/01/opcw-releases-third-report-investigation-and-identification-team>

Syrian Army Responsible for Douma Chemical Weapons Attack, Watchdog Confirms

By Louisa Loveluck

27 January 2023

A unit of elite Syrian troops was responsible for a 2018 chemical weapons attack that killed 43 civilians in the Syrian town of Douma, the global chemical weapons watchdog said Friday.

The 7 April attack was part of a brutal military offensive by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s troops as they forced rebel fighters from the outskirts of Damascus. Photographs that showed men, women and children dead in a stairway began circulating online in the early hours of the next morning. Video footage showed others choking or foaming in the mouth.

The United States, Britain and France retaliated days later, launching a rare salvo of airstrikes against Syrian government targets. But in the months that followed, Syria and its Russian allies vehemently denied that Assad’s forces had been responsible for any chemical attack. International weapons inspectors struggled to access the two sites in question and the incident became a magnet for Russian-backed disinformation.

A previous effort by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) had already concluded that a chemical attack had taken place in Douma, but had no mandate to assign blame.

In the organization's 139-page Report, it described an exhaustive effort to do just that — investigators combed through 1.86 terabytes of data, took 66 witness statements and examined data from 70 samples.

“On the evening of 7 April 2018, at least one helicopter of the Syrian ‘Tiger Forces’ Elite Unit dropped two yellow cylinders containing toxic chlorine gas on two apartment buildings in a civilian-inhabited area in Douma, killing 43 named individuals and affecting dozens more,” the OPCW concluded.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/01/27/syria-chemical-weapons-douma-opcw/>

No End in Sight for Deadlock On Biological Weapons Ban

Riley Griffin, 14 December 2022

Scientific advances have eroded barriers to the development of biological weapons. They are now easier to produce and harder to identify. Despite the increasing threat, the Biological Weapons Convention) a verification protocol to confirm that signatories are not using biology as a tool of war.

Izumi Nakamitsu, the United Nations' Under-Secretary-General of Disarmament Affairs, said that the Biological Weapons Convention is the “least effective” of all disarmament treaties because no clear process exists to determine compliance.

“With chemical weapons, there's a list of prohibited chemicals that are easy to detect

and verify, but with bio, it's much, much more complicated,” Nakamitsu said. “There are a lot of [grey] zones,” particularly when it comes to scientific research being conducted in labs run by industry or academia.

Still, Nakamitsu believes countries should not shy away from the challenge of producing a verifiable treaty. “The international community really needs to tackle those complexities,” she said.

It certainly has tried. In the early 1990s, after Russia admitted operating a covert biological weapons programme in violation of the treaty, the Federation agreed to open non-military laboratories to US and UK officials on a reciprocal basis. This attempt to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention led a dozen Russian officials to conduct surprise inspections of Pfizer facilities in Indiana and Connecticut with only 48 hours' notice.

The visits flustered Pfizer employees and prompted a backlash. The powerful drug industry argued that the inspections compromised business interests and left them vulnerable to intellectual property theft. Their case influenced a consequential US decision to back away from global efforts to monitor biological weapons.

Fast forward nearly two decades: The US has shown a willingness to explore potential verification measures once more, but it is unlikely to get there at the latest Geneva Conference, which concludes on 16 December. So far, the Russian delegation has used the three-week-long global meeting to peddle disinformation alleging that the US supports a biological weapons programme in Ukraine.

A State Department official said that Russia's unsupported claims could serve as a smokescreen to disguise the country's own weaponization of viruses, bacteria and other pathogens. "While at the Conference, I tried to get answers from Konstantin Vorontsov, deputy director of the Russian foreign ministry's department for non-proliferation and arms."

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2022-12-14/no-end-in-sight-for-deadlock-on-biological-weapons-ban>