

Biological Weapons Threat is Growing, U.S. Warns

December 14, 2011 - Speaking before a recent global conference gathered to review the Biological Weapons Convention in Geneva, Switzerland, The US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton called for closer international cooperation to prevent terrorist groups from developing or using biological weapons.

GENEVA (Reuters) – The United States called on Wednesday for closer international cooperation to prevent terrorist groups from developing or using biological weapons, a threat it said was growing.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said countries must strengthen their ability to detect and respond to suspicious outbreaks of infectious disease that could be caused by pathogens falling into the wrong hands.

"Unfortunately the ability of terrorists and other non-state actors to develop and use these weapons is growing. Therefore this must be a renewed focus of our efforts," she said in a speech in Geneva.

"Because there are warning signs and they are too serious to ignore."

She said Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula had urged "brothers with degrees in microbiology or chemistry ... to develop a weapon of mass destruction."

A crude but effective terrorist weapon can be made by using a small sample of widely available pathogens, inexpensive equipment and "college-level chemistry and biology," she added.

States must do a better job of reporting on measures being taken to guard against the misuse of biological weapons and scientists should exchange views on threats, Clinton said.

She was addressing a global conference held every five years to review the Biological Weapons Convention banning biological and toxin weapons, which has been ratified by 165 states.

Iran's ambassador Seyed Mohammad Reza Sajjadi, whose country has ratified the 1975 pact, said the meeting should call on all non-parties, and in particular Israel, to join without delay.

Clinton said the United States saw no need to negotiate a verification regime for the pact as it is extremely difficult to detect biological material and research can serve dual purposes, both military and civilian. Global negotiations 10 years ago failed to agree on a verification mechanism.

"False verification is worse than no verification, in the sense that it gives you this sense of security that is not warranted," a U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told reporters.

Clinton called for maximizing the benefits of scientific research and minimizing the risks that it will be misused.

"For example, the emerging gene synthesis industry is making genetic material more widely available. This obviously has many benefits for research but it could also potentially be used to assemble the components of a deadly organism," she said.

There was a need to balance the need for scientific innovation with the need to guard against such risks, she said.

(Reporting by Stephanie Nebehay and Arshad Mohammed; editing by Andrew Roche)

Points to consider:

Secretary Clinton said: "there are warning signs and they are too serious to ignore, that the ability of terrorists and other non-state actors to develop and use these weapons is growing."

Be aware that prior to his death, Osama Bin Laden has made no secret of his intention to use a weapon of mass destruction (WMD) against us; he had even proclaimed it a "religious duty" for Muslim states to acquire nuclear, chemical and biological weapons to attack the West.

Additionally, consider the availability of chemical, biological radiological and nuclear (CBRN) related technologies over the Internet.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has even urged their "brothers with degrees in microbiology or chemistry to develop a weapon of mass destruction." Al-Qaeda's arm Yemeni franchise is said to be actively recruiting specialists in many forms of terror and has openly discussed deploying deadly poisons in an article in its online English-language journal, "Inspire," titled "Tips for Our Brothers in the United States of America."

Consider that the threat from AQAP should not be underestimated, the affiliate has been responsible for several foiled plots against the West, and has become a magnet for terrorists fleeing the mounting pressure from drone strikes in Pakistan.

Finally be aware that Daniel Benjamin, the State Department's counterterrorism coordinator, said in a speech last month: "AQAP continues to demonstrate its growing ambitions and strong desire to carry out attacks outside its region."