Fighting the Germs: Biological Warfare

Hello Disarmament delegates! I'm Murray and I'll be chairing the Biological Warfare debate along with my esteemed colleagues, Dan and Duncan. If this is your first time at MUN, boy, you are in for a treat. Just work hard and reap the benefits. This is my first time chairing at GWC MUN so if you're feeling nervous, rest assured, you are not alone! Everyone is here for some quality debating so don't be afraid to make your voice heard. It will greatly improve your experience here at GWC.

Onto business then: Biological warfare is defined by the Oxford dictionary as: “the use of toxins of biological origin or microorganisms as weapons of war”

There have been numerous cases of biological weapons being used throughout history, but in more recent times it has risen from relative obscurity to become a hotly contested issue around the world. Biological weapons manufacturing came to a head during the Cold War but since then there have been concerted efforts to decommission weapons.

Background information

Biological weapons are thought to have been used as far back as 400BC when Scythian archers dipped their arrowheads into decomposing bodies, in order to spread disease. It is fairly well known that World War I saw the Germans use mustard gas, but it is much less well known that they also conspired to unleash a whole range of diseases upon opposing troops, such as Anthrax and Cholera.

World War II saw the UK, US and Canada come together to develop a weaponised form of Anthrax. Fortunately its devastating potential was never realised but even after the war, biological weapons (BW) continued to be developed.

The Cold War brought new interest in germ warfare, with the UK, the USSR and the US all investing heavily in research and development. In 1972 the three countries signed the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction or Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) for short. The BWC outlaws production of biological weapons of any type whatsoever and so far has 165 signatories, with 12 awaiting ratification (as of September 2012).

However, it is widely believed that some countries abuse the convention, failing to disclose their operations to the international community. Part of the conditions of the Convention was that a conference be held every five years, to review the current situation. After these reviews, Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) are announced, in order to help stabilise any escalating situations.

In the 1990s it was revealed by Western intelligence agencies that North Korea, Iraq, Russia, China, Cuba, India, Iran, Israel, Pakistan and the former states of Yugoslavia had all engaged in the development of Biological Weapons, paying particular attention to smallpox. In 1995 a Japanese cult known as Aum Shinrikyo (now known as Aleph) gassed several subway stations in Tokyo with Sarin gas, killing 13 people and injuring over a thousand. It brought worldwide attention, with nations shocked at the horrifying ease with which the attack was carried out.

Why go biological?

George Watson’s College MUN Conference 2013
From a purely operational point of view, biological warfare can be a very effective weapon. It can be invisible, it can be cheap and, most importantly, it can decimate thousands in no time at all. Biological germ research can be very contentious due to the fact that it won’t necessarily be used to maim or kill, instead to improve agricultural systems, or cure diseases.

Recent times
To this day, at least two countries (Russia and the USA) retain samples of smallpox, but in secure research centres. Smallpox can be particularly devastating, which is why the WHO keeps around 200-300 million vaccines in storage purely as a precaution.

Anthrax is another disease with horrifying potential due not only to its high fatality rate, but also its ability to travel long distances via the wind. As a result, these two are often the most feared in international circles, generally dominating debates regarding Biological Warfare.

Biological Warfare is unlike the other two types of Weapons of Mass Destruction (chemical and atomic) in that it doesn’t have a specific organisation overlooking its global use. This, coupled with the fact Biological Weapons can be easily hidden or disguised, means it is difficult to act internationally against them. There is also fairly little involvement of Non Governmental Organisations in Biological Warfare debates, compared to other global issues.

Coupled with this is the prospect of BWs falling into the hands of extremists and terrorist organisations, who could then unleash them without the limitations countries may feel, such as becoming engaged in war. The fact that BWs are relatively easy to manufacture (compared to other Weapons of Mass Destruction) makes them all the more worrying. Whilst Biological Warfare has yet to really enter the weapons mainstream many fear that if it does, states will be caught unaware.

Ideas to think about

Should the UN step up its policing of Biological Warfare, and if so, how?

Is there any foolproof way of ensuring the production of Biological Weapons ceases?

Does each state have sole responsibility to police the production and should the UN therefore simply adopt a monitoring role?

Can UN intervention not contravene a country’s sovereign right?

How can the UN control the production by terrorist groups?

You need to submit a Position Paper to me, via email, by Friday the 15th of February at the latest. For those of you who don’t know, a position paper is a brief summary of your country’s stance on Biological Warfare. It should be approximately 50 words long. My email is msteel07@gwc.org.uk. You are also encouraged to bring along at least two resolutions to the conference, each on different committee topics if you want to be considered for an award.

Don’t hesitate to get in touch about anything at all, can’t wait to see you all in March!
Useful links

Where can I find more about this topic?
http://www.emedicinehealth.com/biological_warfare/article_em.htm

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/coldwar/pox_weapon_01.shtml


http://www.loc.gov/rr/scitech/tracer-bullets/chemicalbiotb.html

Where Can I Find Information About My Country?
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country_profiles/default.stm


http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld

Where Can I Find Information About Global Issues?
http://www.newint.org/

http://www.idebate.org/

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world/

http://www.amnesty.org.uk/