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## **Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs**

# **Bio-terrorism: a serious threat for citizens' health<sup>1</sup>**

Opinion and proposed amendments adopted by the Committee on 29 January 2004

Rapporteur for opinion: Mr Latchezar Toshev, Bulgaria, EPP/DC

1. The Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs fully supports the report prepared by Mr Jacquat on behalf of the Committee on Social, Health and Family Affairs and congratulates the author for the comprehensive approach he had on this topic.

2. As it is already stated in the report, there seems to be a general agreement that the risk for a biological attack by a terrorist organisation exists today. It was also stressed in the report on "terrorism: a threat to democracies" adopted in January 2004 by the Assembly (Rec. 1644 (2004)), that "following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been a breakdown of the controls on chemical, biological and nuclear materials and at the same time scientists with experience in the field of weapons of mass destruction have entered the international market".

3. Therefore, having in mind the huge destructive potential of such an attack, no measures to prevent it should be considered unnecessary. The current report of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee is already offering examples as the sarin attack in the Tokyo underground in 1995 or the contaminating of salad bars in Oregon with salmonella culture in 1997. Everybody remembers the anthrax infected letters sent by mail in the US immediately after 11 September 2001. All efforts have to be made to prevent such actions happen again in the future.

4. The possibility of terrorist use, not only of known natural pathogens but also of synthetic biological agents produced for peaceful purposes is particularly worrying. Such use would not only endanger human life and health but it may also cause unpredictable and lasting damage to the natural resources, particularly water, agricultural production and the food chain, thus putting at risk not only human health but also the environment itself. An article published in 1995 in a Canadian Security Intelligence Service publication stated that relatively low-toxic substances, such as off-the-shelf insecticides or household cleaning agents, could be used for terrorist attacks. Other substances, developed for military reasons, are rather easy to be found today. The example of the phosgene oxime, one of the original chemical warfare agents which once featured prominently in the Soviet chemical weapons arsenal, now widely known simply as a toxic industrial chemical and, as such, manufactured, stored, shipped, and commercially available like dozens of other toxic chemicals, is particularly worrying. Some experts also point to the danger of genetically engineered

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<sup>1</sup> See Doc.10067 tabled by the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee

organisms, but most consider these to be too sophisticated and hence rather unlikely for terrorist use.

5. Comparing to chemicals, some toxins have the advantage of being more stable, with some being both relatively simple to manufacture and extremely toxic. Anthrax spores are considered attractive, among other reasons, for their relative hardiness against adverse environmental conditions, as shown by their ability to survive for decades on the Scottish island of Gruinard after biological warfare experiments during World War II.

6. The threat of biological terrorism increases as sciences such as microbiology, biotechnology, molecular biology and genetic engineering develop at a high pace. The products of these sciences can be genetically modified organisms or biological agents with predetermined characteristics potentially dangerous for man and for the environment. As a consequence, the continued development of such sciences should be conditional on states ensuring that the biological agents produced cannot be used as potential terrorist weapons.

7. Two international instruments in particular are relevant: the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction (the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)) and the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction (the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC)). The former prohibits the development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons and the latter bans the development, production, stockpiling, acquisition and retention of microbial or other biological agents or toxins, in types and in quantities that have no justification for prophylactic, protective or other peaceful purposes. It also bans weapons, equipment or means of delivery designed to use such agents or toxins for hostile purposes or in armed conflict.

8. All countries should observe in a very strict manner both the CWC and the BTWC. As already mentioned in Recommendation 1571 (2002) of the Assembly on "Reducing environmental risks by destroying chemical weapons", also referring to Western European Union Assembly Recommendation 701, there are now possibilities for evading both conventions, in particular because of the scientific and technical developments mentioned above. It is therefore important that cooperation among member states in the field of biological safety be enhanced and mechanisms necessary for such co-operation be created.

#### **Amendments proposed by the Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs to the draft resolution**

##### ***Amendment A***

Insert a new paragraph after paragraph 2, to read as follows:

"The Assembly stresses that bio-terrorism could also cause environmental damage, which could be dangerous for people living in the area.";

##### ***Amendment B***

In paragraph 6, after sub-paragraph vii, insert a new sub-paragraph, to read as follows:

"to adopt strict control measures over activities based on the use of modern biotechnologies in order to avoid their misuse for bio-terrorism.";

##### ***Amendment C***

Add, after paragraph 8, a new paragraph, to read as follows:

"It also invites the States to accede to and implement in particular two relevant Conventions of the United Nations: the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention."