

# Formal Consultative Meeting of the States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction

Distr.: General  
6 September 2022

English only

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## 2022 Meeting

Geneva, 26 August and 5-9 September 2022

Item 6 of the agenda

**Respective outstanding questions by the Russian Federation to the United States and to Ukraine concerning the fulfilment of their respective obligations under the Convention in the context of the operation of biological laboratories in Ukraine**

## Disinformation and Article X of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention: A case study

### Submitted by Canada

1. The Government of Canada places great importance on cooperation and assistance under Article X of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC). Over the past 20 years the Weapons Threat Reduction Program (WTRP), which is Canada's contribution to the 31 member [Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction](#) (GP), has delivered hundreds of biological capacity building and threat reduction projects, valued at hundreds of millions of dollars. These projects have meaningfully advanced the objectives of Article X around the world. While it is common for projects to encounter challenges during implementation, Canada's WTRP has completed more than 99% of the Article X relevant projects that it has initiated over the past two decades. Notably, one of the very few projects that Canada's WTRP has been unable to complete was the victim of a targeted disinformation campaign. By sharing information about that experience and its broader implications in the context of the current Article V consultations, Canada aims to highlight to State Parties the very real, damaging and far-reaching impacts of disinformation on BTWC Article X.

2. **Background:** To reduce threats posed by theft, sabotage accidental release and/or terrorist acquisition of dangerous pathogens, Canada's WTRP approached the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic in 2006 with an offer to collaborate to enhance biosecurity, biosafety, and biocontainment capabilities. While there were multiple components to the partnership, the central element was the design and construction of a new human & animal health facility in Bishkek. In early 2007 the Kyrgyz Republic committed to work with Canada on this ambitious collaboration, to which the Government of Canada ultimately committed up to C\$60 million.

3. In August 2008, Canadian and Kyrgyz officials signed a legally-binding bilateral Agreement to cover construction of the new laboratory; the Treaty entered into force on 8 April 2009. The Treaty made clear that the new Facility was to be fully owned and operated by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic after its completion. A copy of the Treaty (which was concluded in English, French, Kyrgyz and Russian) was made public at the time and is available on the Government of Canada website<sup>1</sup>.

4. In the period 2007-2011, Canada worked in the closest possible cooperation with the Kyrgyz Government on the new Level III (BSL3) laboratory, which was to be named the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.treaty-accord.gc.ca/text-texte.aspx?id=105121>



Kyrgyz National Diagnostic Centre for Human and Animal Health (KNDCHAH). The new laboratory was meant to serve as the central repository for the consolidation of dangerous pathogens from several existing, vulnerable facilities. The Technical Laboratory Programming phase for the project was completed in November 2007, the design (~\$6M) was produced in 2008-2009 and the \$50 million contract for construction was signed in Spring 2011.

5. **Information Sharing and Transparency:** Throughout the project, Canada placed the highest premium on engagement with the Kyrgyz Government and awareness raising with the Kyrgyz public. To this end, a bilateral Biological Laboratory Working Group (BLWG) was established in 2007, which met more than twenty times between 2007-2011. In addition, in 2008 Canada supported the Kyrgyz Government to establish a Community Liaison Group (CLG), which aimed to “facilitate communication and maintain trust between this new laboratory and the Kyrgyz public community”. As outlined in the CLG’s Terms of Reference, the Group was meant, inter alia, to i) provide an ongoing opportunity for discussion and sharing of information through an open and transparent process; ii) to include a wide range of expertise and a balanced representation from stakeholder groups, including the community at large; the city of Bishkek; non-Governmental organizations; the health, agricultural and academic communities in the Kyrgyz Republic; and the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic; and iii) to create a basis for and maintain an atmosphere of confidence between the Laboratory and the community. Canada also facilitated contact between Kyrgyz representatives and the leaders of the [Community Liaison Committee](#) at the Canadian Science Centre for Human and Animal Health (CSCAH) in Winnipeg, Canada, an independent group composed of local community members.

6. Regular updates on the Laboratory Project were provided by Canada and the Kyrgyz Republic to the BTWC community, including through joint presentations delivered at the Meetings of Experts in both 2008<sup>2</sup> and 2009<sup>3</sup>. In the period between 2007 to early 2011, the Project was also the source of considerable and overwhelmingly positive media coverage in the Kyrgyz Republic, Canada and internationally.

7. **The Disinformation Campaign:** In early 2011, as the \$50 million contract for construction of the facility was being finalized, the project became the target of an aggressive, sustained and completely unfounded disinformation campaign. The campaign was led by a relatively small group of protestors, who Canada assessed to have ulterior motives and to be supported and encouraged by external backers.

8. The disinformation efforts, which were covered extensively by select media outlets, put forward inaccurate or partial information, unfounded assumptions, and/or deliberate falsification and misrepresentation of the truth. The campaign focused on several themes, including:

- (a) **Motivations of Canada:** The Canadian Government was accused of planning to develop biological weapons at the Facility, which was dubbed the “Laboratory of Death”. It was asserted that Canada intended to dump dangerous pathogens in the Kyrgyz Republic.
- (b) **Bilateral Treaty:** While the Canada-Kyrgyz Treaty was negotiated in good faith by both countries, and in accordance with respective national parliamentary processes, critics insisted that the Agreement was driven by selfish personal interests and was not in the interests of the people. In this context, a key member of the Kyrgyz scientific team working on the project was labelled publicly as an “enemy of the people”. One prominent activist, who disingenuously insisted that the Treaty was full of “loopholes” that would allow Canada to take advantage of the Kyrgyz Republic, characterized the agreement as “a weed that should be uprooted”.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://meetings.unoda.org/section/bwc-mx-2008-statements/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://docs-library.unoda.org/Biological\\_Weapons\\_Convention\\_-\\_Meeting\\_of\\_Experts\\_\(2009\)/BWC\\_MSP\\_2009\\_MX-Statement-090826-PM-Can-Kyrgyz%2BPresentation.pdf](https://docs-library.unoda.org/Biological_Weapons_Convention_-_Meeting_of_Experts_(2009)/BWC_MSP_2009_MX-Statement-090826-PM-Can-Kyrgyz%2BPresentation.pdf)

- (c) Threats: While Canada-Kyrgyz cooperation was rooted in a shared commitment to biological threat reduction, disinformation activists argued without evidence that the Facility would introduce significant new dangers to Bishkek, seriously threatening the health and security of the community and the region.
- (d) Location: The Facility was to be built on a site chosen by the Kyrgyz Government that was the subject of extensive and lengthy analysis to determine its suitability, and that was confirmed by the Kyrgyz Government through a Parliamentary Act (2009), a Presidential Order (2010) and the Implementing Arrangement for Construction (2011). Notwithstanding the extensive due diligence and evidence and precedents from many similar biological facilities in urban settings around the world (including the CSCAH in Winnipeg, Canada), the disinformation critics argued that it was dangerous and irresponsible to build a biological Facility within the city limits.

9. As a direct result of the disinformation campaign, which created intense pressure for the Kyrgyz Government, just days before construction of the new Facility was set to commence the Kyrgyz Government advised Canada that the laboratory could not be built at the agreed site. As the Facility was designed for construction on this specific plot of land – taking into account unique seismic, topographical, geological, environmental and hydrological conditions – Canada concluded that it could not be built elsewhere without substantial, lengthy and very costly modifications. As a result, in September 2011 Canada informed the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic that it was no longer in a position to move forward with the laboratory Project.

10. **Impact of the Disinformation Campaign:** The immediate and most obvious impact of the disinformation campaign was termination of the laboratory project. Canada remains confident that had this Facility been completed, it would have provided enormous health-security benefits in the Kyrgyz Republic, across the region and globally.

11. The demise of the laboratory project had broader implications. As Canada's WTRP and the Global Partnership are cooperative initiatives, and collaboration is contingent upon all parties remaining fully committed, engaged and supportive, all cooperative threat reduction cooperation between Canada and the Kyrgyz Republic came to an end by late 2011. The experience also played a factor in Canada's longer-term decision to redirect its biological threat reduction and Article X relevant activities from Central Asia to other regions.

12. **Disinformation and Article X:** This case study aims to highlight the very real and significant impacts of disinformation campaigns on the provision of assistance in support of Article X of the BTWC. In offering assistance and collaboration under Article X, countries do so with the expectation that their support will be received, regarded and reported with accuracy and honesty. When the motivations of the assistance provider are unfairly maligned and fundamental truths about the collaboration are rejected, a potential outcome is the cessation of cooperation. Such experiences may also result in the diminished willingness of the impacted State Party - and others that are reluctant to become the potential targets of similar disinformation efforts – to offer additional Article X support.

13. In this context, it is in the interest of all members of the BTWC to assess carefully any allegations that are levelled against States Parties cooperating under the auspices of BTWC Article X. If there is substance to any such allegations, and clear and reliable evidence can be produced that proves inappropriate activities, strong action must be taken against those implicated. However, if allegations levelled against States Parties are shown to be without merit, and instead are revealed to be the result of calculated misinformation and disinformation, similarly decisive action is required to dismiss the allegations and challenge those responsible for propagating the disinformation. Failure to do so threatens to expose any and all Article X cooperation in any country to similar disinformation efforts in future, an outcome that would undoubtedly undermine the future of Article X and the BTWC more broadly.