

FAS Working Group on Biological and Chemical Weapons

UNMOVIC Could Help Resolve Future Biological Weapons Crises

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Uncertainties about the possession of weapons of mass destruction, especially biological weapons (BW), remain among the most persistent international concerns. Meanwhile, the only existing international body of trained and experienced biological weapons inspectors, UNMOVIC (the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission), will soon cease to exist unless the UN Security Council decides to extend and modify its mandate. Although there are standing international inspectorates for chemical and nuclear weapons at the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), there is no permanent biological inspectorate.

The BWC States Parties now have an opportunity to take action to facilitate the resolution of future BW (and missile) concerns. Iraq is unlikely to be the last place where such crises arise. Individually or collectively, the States Parties can call upon the Security Council to retain UNMOVIC's valuable organizational and inspection experience, keeping a basic BW inspection staff at headquarters and a body of expert, periodically-retrained inspectors on call.

At its peak, UNMOVIC had about 20 biological inspectors at UN headquarters; it now has about 10, who can be fielded with 24 hours notice. It also has a large number of trained inspectors on call who can be mobilized within 1-2 weeks. These inspectors, drawn from backgrounds covering biodefense, academia and industry, have a broad spectrum of expertise—microbiology, toxicology, biochemistry, molecular genetics, bioengineering, industrial production, biosafety, epidemiology, medicine, etc. All of them have undergone extensive basic and specialized training under UNMOVIC, including practical exercises and real field experience in inspection techniques and the recognition of relevant equipment, materials, sites and agents as well as information management, report writing, and historical, legal and cultural matters. The inspectors are international civil servants, UN employees, drawn from approximately 50 countries. UNMOVIC has benefited in effectiveness and professionalism from the experience of its predecessor, UNSCOM (the UN Special Commission). UNMOVIC's null findings now seem to be vindicated, just as many of UNSCOM's early suspicions about specific sites and activities in Iraq later proved to be correct. As Hans Blix recently commented, UNMOVIC "proved beyond a doubt and under immense pressure that independent, impartial, objective monitoring can be achieved."

Article VI of the BWC permits any State Party to ask the UN Security Council to consider an alleged breach of the Convention, and requires the States Parties to cooperate with any investigation the Security Council may initiate. In addition, the UN General Assembly has given the UN Secretary General the authority to conduct investigations of

the alleged use of BW.¹ In the absence of a standing inspectorate such as UNMOVIC, however, an investigation undertaken under the United Nations would have to rely on hastily-assembled ad hoc inspectors contributed by member states, with miscellaneous levels of training and no teamwork experience. Delays and suspicions of bias would be difficult to avoid.

With new technologies continuing to open up for exploitation new domains such as biochemical incapacitants, the international community cannot afford to relinquish any resource that could help to strengthen the norm against biological weapons. If UNMOVIC is not retained it will surely have to be reconstituted at some future time with a wasteful expenditure of time, money and political effort.

¹ For a discussion of the Secretary General's authority to investigate the alleged use of BW see "Alleged Us Investigation—Authority to Trigger," Working Paper by Australia, BWC/AD Hoc Group/WP13, 19 November 1995, available at www.bradford.ac.uk/acad/sbtwc/ahg29wp/wp013.pdf.