

Statement to Biological Weapons Convention Review Conference, Geneva 29 November 2022



Mr President, Distinguished Representatives:

Disinformation about biological weapons and about public health labs supported through BWC assistance and cooperation initiatives is increasing across all platforms, from multilateral meetings and national politics to traditional and social media.

While disinformation is purely fabricated, the potential consequences of allegations are still significant. They generate uncertainty. They may erode confidence in essential public health infrastructure. They may significantly undermine global biosafety and biosecurity efforts. And they could seriously undermine development aid and cooperation efforts on peaceful biological research.

Scientific cooperation and assistance to share biological knowledge, tools, and best practices is crucial to promote the security of states from infectious disease threats. This is recognised in the BWC, where international partnerships to strengthen global health security form an important pillar of the Convention and have an entire article dedicated to them: Article X.

Disinformation, however, is now significantly jeopardising Article X partnerships and joint efforts to strengthen global health security.

A good example comes from a Canadian-funded project in the Kyrgyz Republic to build a human and animal health laboratory. In 2006, Canada's Weapons Threat Reduction programme approached the government of the Kyrgyz Republic with an offer to collaborate on enhancing biosecurity, biosafety and biocontainment capabilities. The Canadian government committed \$60 million to build a high-containment laboratory, which was to serve as the central repository of dangerous pathogens consolidated from several existing, but vulnerable facilities.

But in early 2011, the project became the target of an aggressive, sustained and completely unfounded disinformation campaign. The fabricated allegations characterised the lab as a "laboratory of death" and said that Canada was seeking to use the lab to develop biological weapons. Other false claims suggested that the lab was dangerous to local citizens, and that Canada was using the programme to take advantage of the Kyrgyz Republic.

The immediate impact of the disinformation campaign was that the project was terminated. Had the lab been completed, it would have provided enormous health-security benefits in the Kyrgyz Republic, across the region and globally.

A less obvious impact is that the experience also played a role in Canada's longer-term decision to redirect its biological threat reduction and Article X-relevant activities from Central Asia to other regions.

Partnerships like those between Canada and the Kyrgyz Republic strengthen public health facilities, biosafety, biosecurity and disease surveillance. They are devoted exclusively to peaceful purposes and have nothing to do with weapons. The Kyrgyz lab example shows how important it is for states to speak up and condemn disinformation campaigns targeted at peaceful cooperation among BWC states parties.

In collaboration with Global Affairs Canada, King's College London has initiated the *Bioweapons Disinformation Monitor*, a resource for disarmament diplomats, national policymakers and institutions to learn more about bioweapons disinformation and how to combat its spread.

We invite you to browse the collection of materials available on our website (BioweaponsDisinformationMonitor.com) and to join us for a side event next week to learn more.

We thank you for your attention.

Filippa Lentzos, Reader and Director MA Science & International Security, Department of War Studies, King's College London

Gemma Bowsher, Research Associate, Department of War Studies, King's College London

Henrietta Wilson, Research Associate, Department of War Studies, King's College London