

Intervention on Implementation of Biological Weapons Convention in Sri Lanka

The COVID-19 Pandemic has clearly demonstrated the heavy socioeconomic costs that biological agents could exert on countries, Sri Lanka being no exception. Sri Lanka has recognized the importance of addressing the risk of intentional use of biological agents, among the range of threats that threaten the country.

The joint External Evaluation of International Health Regulations (IHR) was carried out in 2017 during which biosecurity and biosafety of the country were assessed extensively and identified as priority actions. The National Action Plan for Health Security (NAPHS) 2019-2023 highlighted key actions for Biosafety and Biosecurity.

The national biosafety framework policy according to Cartagena protocol has been developed. Regulations to monitor biosafety standards related to genetically modified organisms (GMO) and living modified organisms (LMO) referring to plants and animals. The Biosafety Manual for Medical Laboratories has been developed by the Sri Lankan College of Microbiologists. Guidelines to protect dangerous pathogens from unauthorized access are included.

The National Advisory Committee on Biosafety and Biosecurity (NCACBB) was established in 2018 to develop and implement a comprehensive multisectoral biosafety biosecurity system in Sri Lanka and its monitoring in order to achieve biological safety in the country. It consists of technical experts from the agencies responsible for human, animal, and plant health, import and export control and the environment. The National Policy on Biosafety and Biosecurity has been drafted by the NACBB. It includes all the policy statements required to satisfy 15 articles of the BWC. The National Biosafety and Biosecurity act can be formulated after revisiting the policy document.

The prevailing global geopolitical situation has further increased the need for countries to be ready for the use of biological agents by any disruptive elements. In this backdrop, the country has taken numerous steps for improving biosafety and biosecurity in preparation for such events in future, intentional or unintentional.

Firstly, the Disaster Preparedness and Response Division, a unit under my purview functions as the BWC focal point. Further, Sri Lanka has been able to bring diverse stakeholders from human, animal, and plant health sectors along with academia and security professionals to discuss and deliberate on improving biosafety and biosecurity.

Secondly, capacity building on biosafety and biosecurity are being carried out across different disciplines and practices. Biosafety and biosecurity trainings are offered by the health sector to the Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) squadrons of the tri-forces and police.

Thirdly, lessons learnt from the COVID-19 Pandemic have been used to improve the biosafety and biosecurity of the country. An intra-action review has been conducted in this regard, where biosafety and biosecurity were extensively discussed, and recommendations were made for improvement.

Fourthly, with the assistance of the Government of Netherlands, Sri Lanka has done all the necessary groundwork for the establishment of the National Inventory of Dangerous Pathogens, which will be detailed in a separate intervention.

Sri Lanka is committed to take all necessary steps to improve the biosafety and biosecurity against potential use of biological weapon. In addition, the country is maintaining high level of preparedness in case of responding to the use of biological weapons.