



# UNITED NATIONS OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM

**Opening Remarks of  
Mr. Vladimir Voronkov  
Under-Secretary-General of the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism**

**Bioterrorism Livestream Conference  
“Bioterrorism: thinking the unthinkable”  
[pre-recorded statement]**

**24-25 March 2021**

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to deliver the keynote speech at this Bioterrorism Livestream Conference – the first of its kind, convening representatives from government, academia and the private sector, including business, trade and insurance areas.

On behalf of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), I would like to thank the Right Honourable the Lord Browne of Ladyton, the University of Cambridge and Pool Reinsurance for organizing this important conference.

The high-level representation at this meeting shows the importance attached to this subject and I would like to acknowledge the participation of esteemed representatives of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland:

- the Right Honourable the Lord Darling of Roulanish, former Chancellor of the Exchequer;
- the Right Honourable Ms. Amber Rudd, former Home Secretary;
- the Right Honourable the Lord Sedwill, the recently retired Head of the Civil Service, Cabinet Secretary and National Security Adviser to Her Majesty’s Government;
- Mr. Bruce Carnegie-Brown, Chairman of Lloyds of London;
- Mr. Tom Hurd, Director General, Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism; and
- Dr. Karin Von-Hippel, Director General, Royal United Services Institute.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the current state of world affairs, with an ongoing pandemic and response systems under pressure, it is of critical importance that the public and private sectors, as well as civil society, come together to find solutions to today's most pressing challenges.

As we all know, the consequences of the pandemic extend far beyond the realm of global health. COVID-19 will have long-term socioeconomic, political, and security consequences.

It is thus imperative that we join forces to build back better; working for a more resilient and safer world. And this includes drawing together the security architecture of our future.

The risk of non-state actors— including terrorists— acquiring lethal technologies and weapons remains as much a challenge for international peace and security as it did when the Security Council adopted resolution 1540 in 2004. That landmark resolution aimed at preventing non-state actors from acquiring nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, their means of delivery, and related materials.

New scientific developments and emerging technologies are transforming human life, industry and the global economy in positive ways.

At the same time, some of these technologies present significant potential for misuse.

Through advancements in biotechnology, for example, it is possible for terrorists with limited technical knowledge to develop or modify pathogens at home using readily accessible materials and equipment.

And there are many other examples. Let me quickly mention some of them, related to bioterrorism, which were raised by INTERPOL at the launch of the UN Office of Counterterrorism and INTERPOL Global Study on the Threat of Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Terrorism last November:

- In March 2020, an individual was imprisoned in Germany for preparing an attack in the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and manufacturing an improvised explosive device containing ricin – a toxin obtained from castor beans;
- In the context of the pandemic, attempts at deliberate COVID-19 contamination through direct human-to-human contact were also detected during the first half of 2020;
- In April 2020, a plot of surface contamination with COVID-19 against law enforcement in Tunisia was foiled; and,

- In September 2020, ricin letters were sent to the U.S. President and law enforcement agencies.

This shows that the possibility of such materials falling into the hands of terrorists is real.

The threat posed by biological terrorism is recognized in the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy as well as in several UN Security Council resolutions, including 1373 (2001), 1540 (2004), and 2325 (2016) and in the Secretary-General's Agenda for Disarmament.

In addition, there are two main UN instruments focused on the prevention, prediction and mitigation of deliberate biological events:

- the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention; and
- the Secretary-General's Mechanism for Investigation of Alleged Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are living in very challenging times. The pandemic has strained critical health infrastructure, showed us the vulnerabilities of response systems, and tested the resilience of the whole world.

The pandemic has brought changes to all aspects of our lives. And it has also brought to light new or emerging challenges, risks and threats.

Terrorists and violent extremists saw an opportunity in the pandemic. They adapted their narratives to stoke fear; sought to exploit the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic to radicalize and recruit supporters; and some even made calls to weaponize the virus. The pandemic also prompted the selling of contaminated bodily fluid samples on the dark web, and even fake vaccines.

This should be a wake-up call.

Allow me to highlight that during his briefing to the Security Council in April 2020, the UN Secretary-General, Mr. Antonio Guterres, warned that "the weaknesses and lack of preparedness exposed by this pandemic provide a window onto how a bioterrorist attack might unfold – and may increase its risks. Non-state groups could gain access to virulent strains that could pose similar devastation to societies around the globe."

In July 2020, my Office organized a Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week, during which the risk of bioterrorism was also widely acknowledged by Member States as well as by relevant UN entities—such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the Office for Disarmament Affairs (ODA)— and INTERPOL.

There was broad agreement on the urgent need to prevent and establish the necessary response mechanisms against the threat of weaponization of biological materials by non-state actors.

And we have taken action accordingly. My Office is working closely with INTERPOL, WHO and ODA in the field of bio-risk mitigation.

Specifically, UNOCT is supporting a UN Counter-Terrorism Working Group in implementing a project focused on establishing and enhancing inter-agency cooperation in the case of a chemical and/or biological attack.

Additionally, UNOCT is implementing a global programme that includes capacity-building activities to prevent and respond to bioterrorism, including training for law enforcement on outbreak containment, biological countermeasures and countering clandestine laboratories.

Lastly, through its joint Global Study, UNOCT in partnership with INTERPOL, will offer analysis of intelligence-based information to help the international community and Member States assess the threat of CBRN terrorism.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Addressing the threat of CBRN terrorism requires our collective action. The global nature of the risk underscores the need for multilateral and multi-stakeholder cooperation.

It is imperative that Member States, international organizations, civil society organizations, academia and the private sector join forces to keep prevention and response to CBRN terrorism as a top priority.

You can count on us in this endeavour.

UNOCT remains committed to assisting Member States to prevent Weapons of Mass Destruction attacks and promoting inter-agency collaboration to guarantee that such a calamity never takes place.

I wish you fruitful discussions.

Thank you.