

Bush administration torpedoed germ warfare treaty

Patrick Martin
28 July 2001

In the latest round of the US government vs. the world, the Bush administration announced Thursday that it was rejecting a treaty against biological weapons which has required seven years of international negotiations. The chief US representative at the Geneva talks on germ warfare, Donald A. Mahley, said the 210-page draft agreement contained “serious, substantive” flaws.

The treaty has the support of nearly all the other 55 countries represented in the Geneva talks, including Japan, Canada and the European powers. The 143 countries which are party to the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention had set a November deadline for drafting the new protocol, which would add a limited enforcement mechanism to the existing treaty.

There was widespread foreign criticism of the US action, not only for vetoing the treaty at the eleventh hour, but because the Bush administration offered no alternative. Without participation by the United States, home to an estimated 40 percent of the world’s pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies, the draft protocol is essentially dead.

A German official told the *Washington Post* that lobbying by chemical and pharmaceutical companies had already weakened the provisions for inspections of plants suspected of producing biological weapons. “Industry, the business community, always wants the least possible intrusive measures. They’re not interested in bureaucrats coming to look over their plants,” the official said. “One of the reasons that we did not get a stronger protocol is that business communities—including the US business community—made sure that there is not a stronger mechanism.”

Because of US industry lobbying, the biological weapons protocol makes it more difficult to mandate

international investigations of suspected germ warfare plants. Under the international treaty banning chemical weapons, inspectors may visit a plant unless three fourths of the countries represented in the treaty executive vote to block the inspection. The biological weapons treaty requires an affirmative majority vote of the executive to authorize an investigation.

The US government position in the talks amounted to demanding a double standard—one rule for the United States and another for the rest of the world. US officials complained both that the draft protocol was too strict, opening up US biomedical facilities and Pentagon germ warfare labs to foreign espionage, and that it was too loose, leaving room for “cheating” by countries such as Iran and Iraq.

One US official said that the inspection procedure would allow foreign governments to use inspections to harass US government laboratories involved in researching biological “defenses,” as well as steal the industrial secrets of American companies. In other words, according to the State Department, international weapons inspectors are spies and provocateurs—exactly what the government of Iraq has long maintained, in its opposition to US-backed UN weapons inspections.

The same official said the administration had decided that because of the rapid development of biotechnology it was not feasible to verify whether countries were abiding by the germ weapons ban. Yet the US government has repeatedly claimed to have detected Iraqi germ warfare operations. This began during the Gulf War, when an Iraqi factory producing baby formula was bombed into ruins as an alleged biological weapons lab. Only three years ago the Clinton administration fired cruise missiles and destroyed a plant making vaccines and medicine in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, claiming it was a biological

weapons lab controlled by Osama bin Laden.

Bush administration officials also maintained that the very fact that Iran and other countries accused by the US of developing biological weapons have agreed to sign the treaty proves the treaty's enforcement provisions are inadequate. "Iran has an offensive biological weapons program," one official said. "Iran would not be signing a document that prevents it from cheating."

This is an obvious Catch-22. The Bush administration declares that because Iran is signing the treaty, the treaty should be opposed. But if Iran were publicly refusing to sign the treaty, the Bush administration would cite its refusal as an argument for rejection. It made just such an argument in relation to the Kyoto Accord on global warming, since China and India have not agreed to the cuts in greenhouse gas emissions required by the treaty.

All roads lead to Rome, and all US government arguments lead to the rejection of international treaties. It is not just a matter of the germ warfare protocol, but one international agreement after another:

* The Bush administration repudiated the Kyoto Accord on global warming almost as soon as Bush entered the White House. Last week 178 nations agreed on an updated version of the treaty, at a conference in Bonn where the United States was the only significant country absent.

* The Bush administration has rejected the establishment of an International Criminal Court for genocide and war crimes, with especially vociferous opposition coming from the Pentagon. Serbs and Rwandans can be hauled before The Hague tribunal with US support, but American officers—and presidents—should have immunity for their actions.

* Bush has repeatedly declared his intention to scrap the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty with Russia, either by mutual agreement with Moscow, or exercising the US right to withdraw from the treaty unilaterally by giving six-months notice.

* Under the Clinton administration, the Republican-controlled Congress rejected the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, ratified by nearly every nation in the world, asserting the unrestricted right of the United States to detonate nuclear weapons.

* Earlier this month the US flatly opposed a UN-sponsored accord to monitor and reduce the burgeoning

international trade in small arms, declaring that it would violate the Second Amendment to the US Constitution (and thus offend the National Rifle Association).

* The State Department announced July 26 that the US would not send delegates to next month's World Conference Against Racism, to be held in Durban, South Africa, unless conference organizers removed two issues from the agenda: a discussion of Zionism as a form of racism, and the question of reparations for slavery and colonialism.

This litany demonstrates not "isolationism," as Bush's tame Democratic opposition claims, but the arrogant insistence of the White House, Pentagon and State Department that they will call the shots for the entire world. It is a reactionary, nationalistic policy of unilateral imposition of American will, relying on an exaggerated conception of US military supremacy and a long-outdated conviction of US economic dominance.

American unilateralism has a more fundamental significance. It demonstrates the futility of efforts to put an end to militarism, racism, environmental pollution, etc., by means of international treaties between rival capitalist nation-states. Agreements on paper cannot remedy the social evils produced by the objective contradictions of the world capitalist system. What is required is the mobilization of the working class on an international basis, against the nation-state system and the profit interests of big business.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact