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Tell-Tale Silence Indicates US Block of the Bioweapons Protocol

After torpedoing Kyoto and the ABM Treaty, the US sets its sights on biological weapons control

(*Hamburg and Austin, 11 May 2001*) – Efforts to strengthen the international ban on biological weapons are in grave danger of collapse. Today, three weeks of negotiations in Geneva to develop a Verification Protocol to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) closed without any contribution from the US, an indication that Washington has quietly withdrawn its support of the process. The US delegation did not actively participate in the negotiations and – with the exception of an insignificant statement during today’s final session – never contributed a single word.

The silence is a *de facto* confirmation of recent press reports indicating that the Bush Administration has decided to back away from international biological weapons control, including a story in *Chemical & Engineering News* stating that Washington prefers not to draw attention to its negative stance after the global protests against the US withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol on climate change.

International protection against biological weapons - and six years of diplomatic work - are at stake. Signed in 1975, the BTWC bans biological weapons; but contains no means to verify that governments are in compliance. In the 1990s, revelations came that Parties to the BTWC (including Iraq and the former Soviet Union) violated the Convention by developing offensive biological weapons. Responding to this problem, in 1995 governments began to create a Verification Protocol to make the BTWC enforceable for the first time ever. This important process was scheduled to be completed this year.

Instead of triumph, 2001 may be the year the verification agreement falls apart. Failure would signal that major powers are no longer in agreement against biological weapons. “*This could well be the beginning of the end of the global ban on bioweapons*” says Jan van Aken of the Sunshine Project. “*Failure might re-ignite some countries' interest in weapons of mass destruction.*”

Previous US positions were problematic and diluted the proposed Protocol's strengths; but according to the Sunshine Project's Edward Hammond, “*at least the Americans were engaged and hope could be held out that they would ratify.*” The new US position is very different. Says Hammond “*The US knows that countries will be hesitant to open their biotechnology facilities to mandatory inspections if the US doesn't agree to do the same. So the US hopes that silence is all that is necessary to kill the protocol.*”

In addition to the resounding hush in Geneva, there are other indications that Washington has lost interest in a global ban on biological weapons. In December, US military officers at a Edinburgh (UK) conference called for renegotiation of the BTWC to allow some so-called non-lethal biological weapons. Susana Pimiento of the Sunshine Project points out that “*The increasing interest in certain biological weapons within the US military community is especially frightening considering the Bush Administration's arrogant unilateralism. The US has tossed the Verification Protocol on the same funeral pyre as the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Kyoto Protocol.*”

The remaining negotiating parties in Geneva should press ahead and build a strong Protocol without the many concessions made to the US during recent years. “*The world must not allow selfish interests to poke a major hole in global peace and security. It must pressure the US back into the Protocol, and into a strong one*”, says Hammond.