



# ASSET

## SHARE AND MOVE TO FACE NASTY BUGS

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The recent terror attack in Paris has raised the fear in Europe, but the threat regards many countries all over the world. While the French drama was on, in Nigeria more than 2,000 people were killed and in the following days children were loaded with bombs and used as living weapons in the crowd. It is then clear that terrorist groups currently menacing the world have no scruples in using any kind of weapons. In this scenario, even a biological attack is an option that cannot be excluded. And in fact, in October 2014, when Ebola caused some few cases outside Africa, members of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) were said to have declared that some of them could deliberately infect themselves in order to spread the disease in Western countries.

‘That wouldn’t be so easy, anyway?’ explains Donato Greco, renowned epidemiologist and public health expert, partner of the ASSET project. ‘Ebola isn’t an airborne disease and one needs to get in touch with infected fluids to catch it. Even if this virus has been considered as a potential biological weapon, it would not be the best choice?’.

The idea of using human carriers or other means to intentionally spread deadly pathogens is not new, but almost as old as the art of war. An incoming document by the ASSET project traces the history of intentionally caused outbreaks, used as powerful weapons against enemies by states and, more recently, by non-state actors, as terrorists.

«No specific starting point is described, but the main biological warfare occurred in a crude form, for instance when the Greeks polluted enemies’ water supplies with animal corpses,

a tactic later used by Persians and Romans» says Kjersti Brattekas, from the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (Forsvarets forskningsinstitutt ? FFI). The sources consulted in the work with the report show that in a battle in Tortona, Italy, in 1155 Barbarossa?s use of dead soldiers and animals to pollute wells was described. In order to spread bubonic plague, in 1422, catapults were used to project diseased bodies into walled fortifications at the siege of Carolstein, a tactic frequently described in literature and works of art.

Blankets infected with smallpox were used to disease Native Americans in the North American Indian Wars and, more recently, Germany was accused of using cholera and plague in 1915, as well as anthrax and glanders in 1916 and 1917.

Several agreements among states, from the Geneva Convention in 1925 to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction (BWC), came into place in 1972. The aim was to stop the use of biological weapons by states but some of them, all over the world, either did not sign the treaty or are supposed not to respect it.

«No states have pronounced a transparent offensive biological weapons programme, but it is assumed that certain capability, arsenals, research or stockpiles is held by some of them», the Norwegian researcher says. «The BWC could largely prevent use of such weapons between states and in warfare, but a pronounced fear is sponsorship by states to non-state actors who are likely to use such weapons for their purposes, as the case of anthrax in USA or the attack in Tokyo underground show. In addition, downscaling or termination of many state BW programmes since the 1970s has led to a significant amount of researchers in the field being cut loose and possibly made available for non-state actors? biological weapon capacity building. If strict control of culture collections

and stockpiles still possessed by states is not upheld, these may too be available for acquisition by non-state actors wanting possession of such materials».

There are many reasons for using biological agents as weapons, such as covert assassinations or attacks, uninhibited spread of disease, targeting groups or populations vulnerable for a specific agent, breaking down public health systems or discredit a specific company or government. In addition, what could be spectacular and different about the spread of disease compared to conventional weapons is the fear and public outrage such an act would create. This is particularly an important feature for bioterrorism, as terrorists are not only interested in as many casualties as possible, but also in creating public fear and distrust in the target populations.

«Governments should plan for addressing the public in the case of an intentionally caused outbreak» Brattekas recommends. «Information about the nature of the threat and recommendations for treatment, detection and transmission should be effectively disseminated. Such information can help people reduce health risks, limit adverse social and psychological effects and maintain trust and confidence in the official services. It can also help people take protective actions as well as reducing the level of disorder, morbidity and mortality».

In intentionally caused outbreaks, as well as in natural ones, a correct, precise, transparent and honest communication is a crucial tool authorities can use to counteract the spread of a disease.

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## ASSET

Action plan on **Science in Society** related issues in **Epidemics and Total pandemics**  
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