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# Do Ukrainian biolabs violate the ban on biological weapons programs?

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An explanation must be offered for what was really going on in Ukrainian laboratories working with highly dangerous pathogens

Unless either Ukraine or the US can prove otherwise, the available

evidence points to Kiev operating biological laboratories which may have violated the Biological and Toxins Weapons Convention.

Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland appeared before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on March 8, [testifying](#) on the US and international response to Russia's attack on Ukraine. After delivering her opening remarks, the veteran US diplomat took questions from the committee members. One question, asked by Senator Marco Rubio, a Republican from the state of Florida, stood out. *"Does Ukraine have chemical or biological weapons?"* he

asked.

Nuland [answered the question](#) very deliberately. *“Ukraine has biological research facilities which, in fact, we’re now quite concerned Russian troops, Russian forces may be seeking to gain control of, so we are working with the Ukrainians on how we can prevent any of those research materials from falling into the hands of Russian forces should they approach,”* she said.



Of note was the fact that none of this was mentioned in the entirety of her opening speech. The purpose of

Rubio's question wasn't to pin Nuland into a corner, but rather set up the follow-on question, designed to deflect a very discomfoting issue into a propaganda opportunity for the US government.

*"I'm sure you're aware," Rubio said, "that the Russian propaganda groups are already putting out there all kinds of information about how they have uncovered a plot by the Ukrainians to unleash biological weapons in the country, and with NATO's coordination."*

The senator paused before asking his question. *"If there is a biological or chemical weapon incident or attack inside Ukraine, is there any doubt in*

*your mind that 100% it would be the Russians behind it?”*

Nuland answered this question with more authority: *“There is no doubt in my mind, Senator. And, in fact, it is a classic Russian technique to blame the other guy for what they are planning to do themselves.”*

Rubio was right about one thing – the Russians were having a field day about the *“biological research facilities”*

Nuland was so reticent about discussing. Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [announced](#) that *“We [Russia] confirm that, during the special military operation in Ukraine,*

*the Kiev regime was found to have been concealing traces of a military biological program implemented with funding from the United States Department of Defense.”*

According to Zakharova, the Ukrainian Ministry of Health, on February 24 – the first day of the Russian offensive – had ordered all the Ukrainian biological laboratories to “urgently” eradicate the stored reserves of “highly hazardous pathogens of plague, anthrax, rabbit fever, cholera and other lethal diseases.” She said the documentation on the “urgent eradication” of the pathogens was “received from employees of Ukrainian laboratories.”

While noting that more work was being done by the Russian Ministry of Defense to fully assess the documents in question, Zakharova said Russia was able to conclude *“that components of biological weapons were being developed in Ukrainian laboratories in direct proximity to Russian territory.”*

*“The urgent eradication of highly hazardous pathogens on February 24 was ordered to prevent exposing a violation of Article I of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) by Ukraine and the United States,”* she added.



Article I of the BTWC states that *“Each State Party to this Convention undertakes never in any circumstances to develop, produce, stockpile, or otherwise acquire or retain:*

- 1. microbial or other biological agents, or toxins whatever their origin or method of production, of types and in quantities that have no justification for prophylactic, protective or other peaceful purposes;*
- 2. weapons, equipment or means of delivery designed to use such agents or toxins for hostile purposes or in*



*armed conflict."*

Earlier, the US Embassy in Kiev [published information](#) relating to what it described as a "*Biological Threat Reduction Program*," a collaboration between the US Department of Defense and the Ukrainian government. According to this data, "*The [biological threat reduction] program accomplishes its bio-threat reduction mission through development of a bio-risk management culture; international research partnerships; and partner capacity for enhanced bio-security, bio-safety, and bio-surveillance measures.*" According to the US Embassy, "*the Biological*

*Threat Reduction Program's priorities in Ukraine are to consolidate and secure pathogens and toxins of security concern and to continue to ensure Ukraine can detect and report outbreaks caused by dangerous pathogens before they pose security or stability threats."*

This all sounds innocuous enough and, if true, seems to meet the criterion set forth in Article 1 of the BTWC regarding *"prophylactic, protective or other peaceful purposes."*

There is suspicion, however, that the Defense Threat Reduction Agency-led biological programs may have a more nefarious purpose. The Bulgarian

investigative journalist, Dilyana Gaytandzhieva, has conducted extensive research into this issue. *“The US Army regularly produces deadly viruses, bacteria and toxins in direct violation of the UN Convention on the prohibition of Biological Weapons. Hundreds of thousands of unwitting people are systematically exposed to dangerous pathogens and other incurable diseases. Bio-warfare scientists using diplomatic cover test man-made viruses at Pentagon bio laboratories in 25 countries across the world,”* she [claimed](#).

Gaytandzhieva’s work has been dismissed by the US as ‘pro-Russian

propaganda.’ But the inescapable fact is that the US does not have a clean record when it comes to compliance with the BTWC. So-called “*bio-defense*” has been used by the US to circumvent, if not outright violate, the provisions of the BTWC in the past. The most flagrant example of this was the [CIA-led “Project Clear Vision,”](#) which from 1997 until 2000 sought to reverse-engineer and subsequently test a Soviet-era “*bomblet*” designed to disperse biological agents, including anthrax. There was a debate within the Clinton administration as to whether “*Clear Vision*” violated the BTWC, which led to the program being halted in 2000.



There is no need to worry about any such malfeasance at the biolabs in Ukraine, however, the director of the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, Robert Pope, [recently told reporters](#). *“What we have today... are small amounts of various pathogens that by and large are things that are collected out of their environment that they need for research to be able to legitimately surveil disease and develop vaccines against.”*

According to Pope, the Ukrainians had *“more pathogens in more places than*

*we recommend,”* adding that his organization had been helping Ukrainian researchers organize their frozen pathogen collections with an eye on preserving genetic information via sequencing before destroying the live samples. *“All of that, obviously, has been derailed here with the recent events,”* he said.

Pope’s biggest concern was that if these biolabs lost electrical power for any extended time, then the frozen samples would thaw out. *“If the ventilation system is damaged, or the building itself is damaged, and these now ambient-temperature pathogens are able to escape the facility, then*

*they can be potentially infectious in the region around the facility,” he said.*

He expressed hope that the facilities would not be deliberately attacked. *“I think the Russians know enough about the kinds of pathogens that are stored in biological research laboratories that I don’t think they would deliberately target a laboratory. But what I do have concerns about is that they would... be accidentally damaged during this Russian invasion.”*

While Pope had been painting a relatively benign picture of the types of pathogens stored at the facilities he supervised, he left a clue about the potential for something far more

worrisome. While noting that many of the biolabs in Ukraine were of new construction, *“others date back to the Soviet-era and the country’s bioweapons program.”* Some of these older laboratories, Pope said, could hold pathogen strains dating back to the Soviet biowarfare programs.

*“Scientists being scientists, it wouldn’t surprise me if some of these strain collections in some of these laboratories still have pathogen strains that go all the way back to the origins of that program.”*

If this is the case, then the Ukrainian labs could very well be the repository of [Anthrax 836](#), an extremely deadly



strain of that disease specifically developed to be delivered in warheads mounted on SS-18 intercontinental ballistic missiles [operating from Ukraine](#).



This, it would seem, would put the labs in direct violation of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, which prohibits the acquisition or retention of pathogens *“that have no justification for prophylactic, protective or other peaceful purposes.”*

Anthrax 836, and other similar Soviet-era biological weapons, no longer

exist. As such, there is no need to conduct research designed to defend from any potential exposure to such agents. The only possible explanation for retention of Soviet-era biological warfare pathogens would be to keep them for some future biological warfare program, or as a source for covert operations seeking to falsely link a target nation, such as Russia, to illegal activity.

If Marco Rubio had been doing his job, instead of promoting anti-Russian propaganda, he could have – indeed, should have – held Victoria Nuland’s feet to the fire regarding what was really going on at the biological labs in

Ukraine. There might be an innocuous answer out there. But until it is provided, it appears that Russia did in Ukraine what the US was unable to in Iraq – launched an attack on a nation which was in possession of prohibited biological weapons.

The statements, views and opinions expressed in this column are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of RT.