

Clinton warns of bioweapon threat from gene tech

December 7 2011, By FRANK JORDANS , Associated Press



U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, center, reacts after delivering a policy statement to the Biological Weapons Convention Review at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, Wednesday, Dec. 7, 2011. (AP Photo/Anja Niedringhaus)

(AP) -- New gene assembly technology that offers great benefits for scientific research could also be used by terrorists to create biological weapons, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton warned Wednesday.

The threat from bioweapons has drawn little attention in recent years, as governments focused more on the risk of nuclear weapons proliferation to countries such as Iran and North Korea.

But experts have warned that the increasing ease with which bioweapons

can be created might be used by terror groups to develop and spread new diseases that could mimic the effects of the fictional [global epidemic](#) portrayed in the Hollywood thriller "Contagion."

Speaking at an international meeting in Geneva aimed at reviewing the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention, Clinton told diplomats that the challenge was to maximize the benefits of scientific research and minimize the risks that it could be used for harm.

"The emerging gene synthesis industry is making genetic material more widely available," she said. "This has many benefits for research, but it could also potentially be used to assemble the components of a deadly organism."

Gene synthesis allows genetic material - the building blocks of all organisms - to be artificially assembled in the lab, greatly speeding up the creation of artificial [viruses and bacteria](#).

The U.S. government has cited efforts by terrorist networks such as al-Qaeda to recruit scientists capable of making [biological weapons](#) as a national security concern.

"A crude but effective terrorist weapon can be made using a small sample of any number of widely available pathogens, inexpensive equipment, and college-level chemistry and biology," Clinton told the meeting.

"Less than a year ago, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula made a call to arms for, and I quote, 'brothers with degrees in microbiology or chemistry ... to develop a weapon of mass destruction,'" she said.

Clinton also mentioned the Aum Shinrikyo cult's attempts in Japan to obtain anthrax in the 1990s, and the 2001 anthrax attacks in the United

States that killed five people.

Washington has urged countries to be more transparent about their efforts to clamp down on the threat of bioweapons. But U.S. officials have also resisted calls for an international verification system - akin to that for nuclear weapons - saying it is too complicated to monitor every lab's activities.

©2011 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: Clinton warns of bioweapon threat from gene tech (2011, December 7) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-12-clinton-bioweapon-threat-gene-tech.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--