

INTERPOL African Regional Workshop in the prevention of bio-terrorism

Speech by INTERPOL President [Jackie Selebi](#)
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*(Secretary General) Ronald Noble,
John Abbott,
Police chiefs,
Distinguished colleagues,
Fellow law enforcers,
Health experts,
Ladies and gentlemen,*

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you in Cape Town.

Are we fully prepared to prevent or effectively deal with the threat of a bio-terrorist attack? The next three days will be a learning opportunity and raise our awareness about the need for preventive measures in the case of [bio-terrorism](#) preparedness and crisis management.

The threat of bio-terrorism

The bio-terror threat has increased over the past few years. As bio-technology advances and as information becomes more accessible, particularly through the Internet, the risk of biologic agents or toxins being misused as an evil tool for [terrorism](#), increases.

Unfortunately, the world generally – and the police community in particular – is largely unaware of, and therefore largely unprepared for, bio-terrorist attacks. Today, there are indications that terrorist organizations have a heightened interest in the use of biological weapons, establishing terrorist support cells in different regions around the world with the ability and willingness to carry out bio-terrorist attacks.

Using bio-weapons could potentially result in thousands of casualties in addition to other disastrous long-term consequences. Since pathogens (biological agents or germs) reproduce easily, even a small amount of agents smuggled out from secured premises could be used as the basis of a large arsenal.

These biological agents or germs are virtually undetectable and can be brought relatively easily and safely into a country by an individual. They are therefore seen as an ideal terrorist weapon for mass destruction and for causing public hysteria. Biological weapons have been called ‘the poor man’s atom bomb’. The bio-terrorist threat is therefore real and not imaginary. The issue of bio-terrorist attacks is not ‘if’ but ‘when’.

INTERPOL response

Preventing bio-terrorist acts and responding to their consequences requires the involvement and mobilisation of actors and resources in many sectors other than health, or law enforcement for that matter.



INTERPOL recognised the need to enhance the co-ordination of efforts at the national, regional and international level to strengthen the global response to this serious threat to international security. The police cannot afford to be unprepared for the eventual misuse of biological agents by terrorists groups.

There is a need to define strategies and develop training programmes to ensure that law enforcement is able to prevent and/or respond to an event that could possibly disrupt society as a whole or inflict mass casualties. In order to do this effectively, the police have to work with public health institutions, the scientific community and international organizations.

With the support of the [Alfred P. Sloan Foundation](#), INTERPOL launched its program on the prevention of bio-terrorism in 2004 to improve the understanding, preparedness and capability of law enforcement agencies to tackle bio-terrorism.

INTERPOL's programme on the prevention of bio-terrorism is designed to promote two objectives:

- (i) provide information and training to police and
- (ii) vitalise INTERPOL's central role in global efforts to prevent bio-crimes.

Among the major activities of the INTERPOL bio-terrorism initiative is the conduct of a global conference and three regional workshops on bio-terrorism. The [First INTERPOL Global Conference on Preventing Bio-Terrorism](#) was held in Lyon, France, in March 2005.

It was attended by more than 500 delegates from 155 countries, with representatives from the police, scientific and academic communities, as well as delegates from international and non-governmental organizations. The Global Conference concluded that further co-operation between law enforcement agencies, public health authorities and other relevant organizations is essential to address the threat of bio-terrorism and that training is key to successful preparedness in this area.

INTERPOL African Regional Workshop on Bio-Terrorism

The INTERPOL bio-terrorism regional workshop here in South Africa is the first among the three regional workshops as part of INTERPOL's programme on bio-terrorism. Along with INTERPOL Secretary General [Ronald Noble](#), we deemed it important to organize the first INTERPOL regional bio-terrorism workshop in Africa. Africa, like any other continent, could be a target of a bio-terrorism attack or could be used by terrorists at the pre-attack stage.

This workshop aims to inform African policy makers, law enforcement officials, public health officials and other stakeholders of bio-terror threats and to underline the need to strengthen regional co-operation, especially in being able to immediately identify and work closely with the right partners at the right time to establish a common response against biological weapons and to resolve the consequences of bio-attacks.

The African regional workshop intends to establish or improve relations with all stakeholders, i.e., governments, the public health sector, law enforcement units, private industries, international organizations and the community, in order to achieve a response mechanism capable of minimising the risks to public health from bio-terrorist incidents.

I am confident that with a holistic stakeholders' approach on bio-terrorism we will strengthen disease outbreak surveillance, investigation capacity, preparedness planning, effective communication and response here in this region.

Many infectious diseases caused by pathogens that have the potential to be used in bio-terrorism are endemic in parts of Africa, such as anthrax and Ebola. Health-care services must be prepared to handle these natural outbreaks. Improving this capability will be essential to successfully respond to an intentional release of a disease agent in bio-terrorism.

In addition to the medical services required in a natural outbreak, a bio-terrorism event will require public health services and law enforcement to co-operate closely in the area of crisis response and to conduct criminal investigations.

Our capability to manage outbreaks must be improved. Prevention is, however, our best line of defence. INTERPOL encourages the development of capacity-building measures coupled with relevant legislation on bio-terrorism prevention. Besides appropriate legislation in this area, it will be necessary for all of us to develop a Bio-Terrorism Crisis Response Plan and develop our capability to gather, assess, compile, analyse and disseminate information related to potential bio-terror threats.

In all of your endeavours, let me assure you of INTERPOL's utmost support. Among other bio-terrorism prevention programs, INTERPOL will also adopt the 'train the trainers' approach in which we provide expert training on bio-terrorism prevention and incident management to your trainers, who can then transmit the knowledge and training acquired to their colleagues at the national and local level.

Conclusions

When preventing bio-terrorism, it is essential that we are all aware of the nature and seriousness of the threat of this crime so that appropriate measures and co-ordinated responses are put in place. We policemen cannot effectively face the problem of bio-terrorism or the proliferation of biological weapons without building strong partnerships with scientists, educators and public health practitioners, inasmuch as one country cannot tackle bio-terrorism or terrorism and trans-national crime in isolation.

INTERPOL and the police services around the world must be part of a broader integrated response by the international community to combat the threat of the terrorist use of bio-agents. I am confident that this regional workshop will bring us closer to our goal.

Thank you and good day.