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Global Nature of Terrorism Drives Biosurveillance

12:12 GMT, October 28, 2011 WASHINGTON | The global nature of terrorism and the growing potential of nations and individuals to acquire weapons of mass destruction drive the Defense Department's effort to counter these threats, the assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical and biological defense programs said Oct. 27.

Andrew C. Weber said DOD programs target nuclear deterrence, seek out early warning for infectious diseases, and bolster the ability of U.S. partners around the world to prevent, prepare for and respond to events involving WMD.

"Our national security strategy makes preventing and preparing for the possibility that terrorist groups would acquire weapons of mass destruction, whether it be biological weapons or nuclear weapons, our first priority," Weber said during an interview here with American Forces Press Service and the Pentagon Channel.

The 2001 terrorist attacks on New York, Pennsylvania and the Pentagon drove home the global nature of terrorism, the assistant secretary said.

Later that year, he said, a series of anthrax attacks in the United States caused defense officials "to focus more attention on the possibility that terrorist groups would acquire biological or nuclear weapons and use them against cities here or around the world."

Since 9/11, he added, the Defense Department has broadly improved its response to terrorist nuclear, chemical and especially biological threats, which can be accessible to small groups, terror cells and even individuals.



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"This is why it's so difficult to disrupt and to learn about these types of attacks while they're being planned," Weber said, "so we need to be very prepared."

American forces are now vaccinated against anthrax and smallpox, he said, and the department has stockpiled antibiotics against potential biological attacks.

"In a sense, we have taken parts of the biological threat off the table," Weber said, "by improving our capability for medical countermeasures and early warning and surveillance."

To keep terrorist groups from getting access to materials needed to construct biological weapons, he said, DOD has helped strengthen biosecurity at laboratories in the United States.

"We also have launched a program working with partners around the world to make sure public health and veterinary laboratories that have dangerous pathogen strains that cause diseases like anthrax and ebola are better secured," the assistant secretary said.

Some kinds of biological attacks by terrorists, he said, could look at first just like natural disease outbreaks.

"We might not know about it until people or even animals show up sick or start dying," he said, "so the best thing you can do [is] to have a global early warning system for biological attacks, whether they are deliberate or natural."

The Defense Department has several programs that involve global biosurveillance, Weber said, including the Global Emerging Infections Surveillance and Response System, or GEIS, a division of the Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center.

For 50 years, he said, DOD has had a network of biomedical laboratories in countries around the world that are part of this system.

The laboratories allow DOD scientists to develop drugs for rare diseases that are not endemic in the United States but that may be in countries where U.S. forces are deployed, Weber said.

"They also give us a good platform," he added, "for enhancing regional partner capacity to detect and monitor and respond to infectious disease outbreaks."

Humans today inhabit an interconnected world," Weber said, so a disease outbreak anywhere on the planet is a potential global threat.

"That's why we need to work with our partners to have a global system for early warning," he said.

Early warning systems for diseases, based on good laboratory diagnostics and information systems for tracking sick people, he added, are "essential because the most-important aspect of preventing mass casualties in a biological attack is time."

The Defense Department has a robust program to develop medical countermeasures and rapid diagnostics for a range of specific biological threats, Weber said, that terrorist groups and countries like North Korea are pursuing.

Weber said DOD works closely with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, and with the World Health Organization, which has global

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responsibilities under the United Nations for improving the world's capability to respond to infectious disease outbreaks and working with health authorities worldwide in the event of an outbreak or attack.

"The Department of Defense has a liaison officer assigned to WHO Headquarters," he said, "and recently the U.S. government signed an agreement with WHO [to fund] some efforts to enhance capabilities around the world to monitor infectious diseases."

In countering future biological threats, the assistant secretary said, research and development plays an important role.

"With the revolution in biotechnology ... the range of threats is potentially infinite," Weber said, "so we need a rapid response capability after exposure, once we identify what is causing the disease, to develop a drug quickly, within weeks or days, rather than the years ... it takes now."

The Defense Department has its own biological research laboratories, he said, that work on developing medical products and it also works with industrial and academic partners around the world.

"Agencies like DARPA [Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency] and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency have been very active in funding biodefense research," Weber said.

The focus, he said, is on finding rapid ways to respond to a biological attack from an unknown agent, quickly characterize it and develop a countermeasure.

"Rather than having a drug or a vaccine for every potential [threat]," Weber said, "we need a capability to respond quickly, to be able to characterize what is causing illness, and then to develop as quickly as possible a medical countermeasure to save lives."

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