

# International Conventions on Biological, Chemical and Environmental Warfare

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## Chemical and Biological Warfare:

### The Geneva Protocol:

A number of countries used poison gas as a weapon during the First World War, resulting in many deaths and excruciating injuries. The Geneva Protocol banned countries subsequently from using these substances as weapons.<sup>1</sup> This was not the first international agreement to limit the use of poisonous chemicals in armed conflict, but the first that involved a significant proportion of the international community.

The agreement prohibited 'the use in war of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases' and also 'the use of bacteriological methods of warfare'. While making clear that these types of weapons were not to be used, it did not include provisions relating to the production, storage and transfer of these weapons, however. It could be considered very successful in achieving its aims nevertheless; the use of chemical weapons in World War II was much rarer than in World War I.

The agreement was first signed in Geneva on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1925 and entered into force generally on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1928, and in Australia on May 24<sup>th</sup> 1930. Like many other countries, Australia entered a reservation initially not to be bound in relation to any state that did not also respect the Protocol. This reservation has since been withdrawn. Over 130 countries are now signatories to this agreement.<sup>2</sup>

### The Biological Weapons Convention:

The *Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction* was the first multilateral disarmament treaty prohibiting an entire category of weapons.<sup>3</sup> It bans states that sign and ratify this Convention not only from developing, producing or stockpiling microbial or other biological agents and toxins that have no medical, protective or peaceful purpose, but also from producing or accumulating weapons or equipment designed to use or deliver these in armed conflict, or for other hostile purposes. The Convention does not explicitly prohibit the actual use of biological weapons – already banned under the Geneva Protocol – but the above provisions, combined with an obligation to destroy stockpiles and prevent the transfer of biological weapons, are tantamount to a complete ban.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Bio/1925GenevaProtocol.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/WebSign?ReadForm&id=470&ps=P>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.unog.ch/80256EE600585943/\(httpPages\)/04FBBDD6315AC720C1257180004B1B2F?OpenDocument](http://www.unog.ch/80256EE600585943/(httpPages)/04FBBDD6315AC720C1257180004B1B2F?OpenDocument)

In order to ensure that a commitment to this Convention does not hamper scientific progress, it still permits and encourages states to engage in the exchange of biological information and materials to enhance scientific research for peaceful purposes.

Australia signed the Biological Weapons Convention in Washington DC on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1972. It entered into force generally on March 26<sup>th</sup> 1975 and in Australia on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1977. Over 170 states have signed the agreement (notable exceptions being Israel and several large African countries), though a number of countries that have signed are yet to ratify their agreement.

### **The Chemical Weapons Convention:**

The Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction is a multilateral agreement banning the use of chemical weapons. The treaty defines chemical weapons as the toxic chemicals themselves – i.e. chemicals which can cause death, temporary incapacitation or permanent harm - and also the munitions and other devices designed to release them. The ban applies both to substances developed only for warfare and to those that may have other domestic uses but can also be used in armed conflict.

The Convention prohibits participating states not only from using such weapons, but also from engaging in their development, production, transfer, acquisition or retention. It obliges states to declare if they possess or have traded any chemical weapons, and to make plans for the destruction of any such weapons in their possession.

As with the Biological Weapons Convention, this agreement also contains provisions that permit engagement in research, trade and production of chemical materials for the furthering of scientific knowledge and other peaceful purposes.

The Convention was signed in Paris on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 1993. It entered into force generally, and in Australia, on April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1997. Over 180 states are party to this convention (notable exceptions being Egypt and North Korea). A number of states (including Israel and Myanmar) have signed the agreement but are yet to ratify their participation.<sup>4</sup>

## **Environmental Warfare**

### **The Environmental Modification (ENMOD) Convention:**

Deliberate environmental modification as a military tactic is covered by its own agreement. The Convention on the Prohibition of Military or other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques bans states from engaging in acts with widespread, long-lasting or severe environmental effects aimed at damaging another state that has ratified the treaty. It covers intentional manipulation of all elements of the 'dynamics, composition and structure' of the earth, including its atmosphere, ecology and geology.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.opcw.org/about-opcw/non-member-states/>

The Chemical Weapons Convention (see over) also contains some sections concerning the protection of the environment.

The Environmental Modification Convention was signed in Geneva on May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1977. It entered into force generally on October 5<sup>th</sup> 1978, and in Australia on September 7<sup>th</sup> 1984. It is not as widely subscribed to as many of the other treaties that regulate the waging of war; seventy states are party to the ENMOD treaty, with more having signed but not ratified their agreement.<sup>5</sup>

**Further information:**

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons: <http://www.opcw.org/>

The Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention Website: <http://www.opbw.org/>

DFAT page relating to the Geneva Protocol and Biological Weapons Convention:

[http://www.dfat.gov.au/security/biological\\_weapons.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/security/biological_weapons.html)

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/WebSign?ReadForm&id=460&ps=P>