



BIOTERRORISM DRAMATIC IMAGINATION AND REAL RISKS

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The art of drama has been taken to task for disseminating the culture of violence, increasing crime rates, and instilling toxins in the minds of young people. Much has been said about the necessity of tightening control over dramatic works and censoring scenes that could negatively affect young people and society. Given the danger of such dramatic content, what is more dangerous is that it would be a source of inspiration for terrorist groups so they would plan and carry out their crimes, especially the ones related to bioterrorism. The threat here is far greater than conventional terrorist hazards.

Different Models

Works of art that deal with bioterrorism tend to offer vivid examples for future terrorists, providing detailed plans of ways to obtain biological weapons, manufacture them, and use them to threaten, kill and terrorize human beings. Hence, there are substantial fears that extremist groups could utilize these implicit suggestions in dangerous terrorist operations, jeopardizing the security of the whole world. These risks have multiplied with the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, which caused great material and human losses and panicked the whole world, demonstrating the vulnerability of countries in the face of these pandemics, and showcasing the potential horrors of bioterrorism.

Concepts and Dangers

Categorized as the most lethal and detrimental type of terrorism, bioterrorism can be defined as the deliberate use of micro-organisms and their toxic secretions to spread diseases, cause mass killings, and permanently destroy the natural environment. According to the International Criminal Police Organization INTERPOL, bioterrorism refers to the deliberate release of viruses, bacteria or toxic substances to harm humans and the environment, and to serve political or social agendas to forcibly subjugate citizens and governments.

Bioterrorism is classified as the most dangerous and destructive type of terrorism. Terrorist groups may resort to accessible and low-cost biological weapons due to their ease of manufacture, low cost, and ability to proliferate. For example, a single bacteria cell can multiply to billions in a few hours. Besides, it is hard for traditional anti-terror sensing systems to detect these types of weapons which disseminate quickly whether by air, food or water. They can therefore cause extreme damage and great chaos, not just physically but also psychologically.

Reports indicate that terrorists are determined to use biological weapons in their criminal operations. Access to knowledge regarding the use of these substances has become available online, and terrorists have a secret communication network, such as the dark web, which enables them to purchase substances and share information related to bioterrorism. This has prompted the United Nations to confirm that the world is facing extremely complex security challenges represented in bioterrorism, which would result in significant diseases and fatalities, causing widespread disruption and anxiety, disrupting travel and commerce, and destroying international economy.

Drama and Bioterrorism

There is an umbilical cord between bioterrorism and watching films and television serials that deal with crimes of this kind. Much as they entertain people and provide them with pleasurable suspense, the content of these dramatic works can well be used for malicious purposes. For example, one movie revolving around the cold war between the United States and the former Soviet Union narrates the story of a Soviet scientist who participates in creating a lethal microbe in a secret laboratory; he is coerced into committing this crime after members of his family have been kidnapped, with virtual threats of murdering them if he does not acquiesce. Fearing for his family, he is forced to participate in the manufacture of the microbe, which is consequently used by a criminal in a major terrorist operation. Likewise, in one third world country, an insurgent group carries out a biological attack on a car park, which would subsequently pave the way for the actual use of this weapon for terrorist purposes.

Such films and serials present examples of backward countries seeking revenge against developed countries in retaliation against years of oppression under colonization. Meanwhile, there are reports of conspiracies wrought in these developed countries which seek to establish their hegemony through launching orchestrated terrorist attacks. This explains the proliferation of cross-border espionage stories, and

the extensive online content permeating social media, providing clear examples of this type of terrorism.

Impending Danger

In the face of the repugnant threats of bioterrorism, we must instantly deal with this challenge, particularly in view of the theories that attempt to explain the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic which has spread so quickly all over the world. At first, the idea of an epicenter in the Wuhan market and a possible jump of the virus from the animals traded there to humans was spread.

Then another pseudo-hypothesis circulated, which postulated on unfounded grounds that the virus had passed from bats to native animals and from the latter to humans in different contexts near that locality. More risky bets appeared, postulating for example that an involuntary escape originating in a laboratory was the cause of this event of global dimension, which is the very definition of biosafety deficiency. There also existed more evidence of possible unprecedented bioterrorist attacks worldwide in what came to be known as “biosecurity deficiency”. Terrorist groups were thus instigated to explore the prospect of utilizing these viruses as biological weapons.

For example, groups affiliated to ISIS the terrorist organization launched campaigns promoting the use of biological weapons in retaliation against the massacres at the two mosques in New Zealand in 2019, described by the CNN as a carefully planned and unprecedented atrocity that shocked the usually peaceful nation. Shortly before the massacres, the said groups posted a detailed video clip which insinuated bioterrorist attacks like Hantaviruses that infect individuals’ lungs in addition to cholera and typhoid. They also pointed out the methods of proliferating these clandestine weapons in targeted countries.

All these developments confirm that the world today is facing a severe bioterrorist hazard. Originating in some dramatic works, bioterrorism has deplorably become our fait accompli; it is inevitable then to agree on a prompt international preemptive action to forestall its occurrence.

Biosafety and Confrontation

Laboratory biosafety describes the principles of containment, technologies and procedures applied to prevent unintended exposure to biological agents and toxins or their accidental leakage. As for laboratory biosecurity, it refers to the protection, control

and accountability measures with respect to biological agents and toxins, to prevent their loss, theft, misuse, detour, unauthorized access and intentional unauthorized release.

The United Nations has been genuinely concerned about the threat to states and citizens if terrorist groups deliberately started to use biological agents in their operations. The Experts Meeting of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Biological and Toxin Weapons and their Destruction exhaustively explored this issue. These discussions come in response to the dire effects that can result from the misuse of these biological weapons that would turn human life into incessant terror, successive disasters, and permanent mourning.

Though terrorists will certainly continue to use traditional methods in their operations, the possibility that they would use biological weapons to cause mass destruction remains very likely in the near future, a fact that has been confirmed by most hypotheses and scientific studies in the field and by lived experience. Therefore, preserving the lives of human beings and the stability of countries in the long run must entail the imposition of a number of practical measures to counter this potential bioterrorism; most notably:

- Strict control of scientific research in biological laboratories so that they may not be misused by some individuals or groups.
- Stipulating rules that require scientific journals to assume their responsibilities towards research in the biological field, in order to avoid publishing studies that would ultimately endanger public health or national security.
- Creating databases that help predict potential bioterrorist threats and preventing the use of biological weapons against the state and its citizens.
- Establishing an epidemiological surveillance system and arming it with tools that would enable it to deal professionally with biosecurity issues.
- Reinforcing the capabilities of countries and health and social institutions in dealing with bioterrorist hazards, especially methods of prevention, preparedness, confrontation, and retaliation.
- Coordination of international efforts in dealing with biological hazards, and drawing integrated strategic plans to face this emerging reality.
- Providing drugs and vaccines that would treat the effects on human beings of a potential chemical or biological attack.

Necessity of Harmonization

It is true that governments have to take legislative, regulatory and supervisory measures to combat potential bioterrorism and to monitor biological scientific research in laboratories. However, such measures must not interfere with the freedom of scientific research and the circulation of its results. This complex process of combating bioterrorism must go hand in hand with combating social, economic and political injustice. Millions of people die in poor countries because they do not obtain the minimum standards of care and treatment, while developed countries stockpile huge quantities of vaccines and patents in case of emergencies.

With the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, bioterrorism regained its most powerful ability to intimidate people. Hence, threats to national security are no longer confined to the military or economic arenas, and it is thus incumbent upon us to take different measures to deal with these bioterrorist hazards through three key pathways:

- Preventing terrorist groups from accessing biological weapons;
- Being well-prepared, nationally and internationally, to deal with biological hazards upon their occurrence;
- Employing drama in the battle against bioterrorism to increase social awareness towards these hazards and towards the best ways to deal with bioterrorist attacks to minimize their catastrophic effects.

If drama may be a source of inspiration for terrorist groups, it can also inspire countries and their institutions to take necessary measures to counter the hazards of bioterrorism.