

# COVID-19 AND FUTURE PANDEMICS: THE SPECTRE OF BIOTERRORISM

WEBINAR

2 JULY 2020, 09.00 – 10.30 (NEW YORK) – 15.00 – 16.30 (GENEVA)

## CONCEPT NOTE

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) a global pandemic. The on-going crisis has had an unprecedented impact not only on public health but also on the global economy, social well-being and critical infrastructure.

Moreover, in April 2020, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General warned about the threat COVID-19 poses to international peace and security, noting that: *“The weaknesses and lack of preparedness exposed by this pandemic provide a window onto how a bioterrorist attack might unfold - and may increase its risks. Non-state groups could gain access to virulent strains that could pose similar devastation to societies around the globe.”*

The COVID-19 pandemic underlines the catastrophic consequences of infectious disease events of this kind and highlights the similar effects that an act of bioterrorism could have. One of the challenges Member States face during this pandemic is the potential amplification of the crisis through the deliberate transmission of the virus by terrorist and violent extremist groups, as we have seen in recent calls from these groups to spread the virus. More broadly, this pandemic is a reminder of the destructive potential of bioterrorism and the possible misuse of viruses and technology to generate future pandemics.

The webinar will discuss the threat of bioterrorism during the on-going COVID-19 pandemic (deliberate transmission) as well as bioterrorism as a potential source of origin for future pandemics (deliberate release). The webinar will also analyze how technology could help to identify the origin of disease outbreaks and to model and forecast the spread of infectious disease, actions that are essential to understanding whether there has been a deliberate release by terrorist groups and how the outbreak is likely to evolve.

The event is organized within the framework of UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact Working Group on Emerging Threats and Critical Infrastructure Protection project “Technology and Security: Enhancing Knowledge about Advances in Science and Technology to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Terrorism”. The project is implemented by the UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and co-implemented and funded by the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT).

The objective of the project is to understand the risks and benefits associated with WMD-relevant advances in science and technology. The main output of the project will be a report detailing background on WMD-terrorism relevant advances in science and technology, risk scenarios, technology-based countermeasures matched to the identified risk scenarios, and a set of strategic recommendations and follow-up actions for capacity-building.

The project addresses concerns that have been raised in multiple UN Security Council resolutions (1624, 2129, 2178), reports and statements of the Secretary-General, each acknowledging that while enabling tremendous benefits for humanity, technologies ranging from artificial intelligence and robotics to the Internet and biotechnology, also introduce new and emerging threats and security challenges.