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'Nonlethal' Weapons Put Humanity at Risk

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BODY:

The same technological revolution that is now accelerating the development of new medical products is also making it possible for coercive regimes to manipulate human beings by altering their psychological processes, controlling their behavior, interfering with reproduction or tampering with inheritance — and even to do so without the knowledge of the victims.

The International Red Cross, not usually alarmist, has taken the unusual step of issuing an urgent appeal to prevent the use of this technology as a weapon through hostile manipulation of fundamental life processes.

Weapons with these unprecedented capabilities have been outlawed, along with other chemical and biological weapons. Some nations, however, are trying to legitimize the development of so-called "nonlethal" weapons, citing their potential usefulness in situations like the recent Moscow hostage crisis.

The United States has been trying for years to find a chemical incapacitating agent that would act rapidly and safely, but one of the participating scientists says that what happened in Moscow, where the "nonlethal" aerosol used to subdue the hostage-takers killed about 120 of the 750 hostages, is indicative of the problems they face. With any substance delivered through the air in an emergency action, it is impossible to control individual doses. A significant degree of lethality is inevitable. If development of "nonlethal" weapons is allowed, chemical agents will soon be available for incapacitating human beings by inflicting intense pain, altering bodily functions or controlling mood, thought and consciousness.

Delivery methods include dart guns, aerosols, even viruses. The temporary advantage these weapons might provide in a hostage situation will soon be countered by terrorists in gas masks, but the potential for controlling human beings will persist. The power of "nonlethal" weapons — not simply death and destruction but manipulation of people and populations — will constitute an enormous temptation.

The risks for humanity go far beyond the threat of terrorism. We are on the verge of an arms race sparked by the misleading term "nonlethal" — which was coined to sell this weaponry to the public — and the Moscow hostage crisis, which is providing an excuse for nations to acquire such weapons. Yet as a military contractor in the field acknowledged just after the surviving hostages were rescued, such weapons are "not the silver bullet that some people think."

When one country develops these weapons, there will be a strong impetus for other countries to do so, lest they be threatened by them. History shows that once a weapon is in a country's arsenal, it is likely to be used, not always for the purpose originally intended. For example, tear gas, a riot-control agent, was used in the Vietnam War to increase the reach and deadliness of conventional weapons.

That is why the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993 and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention of 1972 outlawed the possession of chemical and biological weapons, even though their use was already prohibited by the Geneva Protocol of 1925.

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Most "nonlethal" weapons are toxin derivatives. The biological convention categorically prohibits them, but this has been routinely ignored. The chemical convention also prohibits them but contains an undefined exemption for "law enforcement," a gaping loophole that threatens to undo the ban.

The 153 chemical convention signatories will have an opportunity to limit that loophole in April, when the convention is scheduled to be reviewed. Yet it is already apparent that many governments want to leave their options open. Unless there is public pressure, there will be no barrier to the development of toxin weapons.

The technology to develop semi-lethal and potentially manipulative weapons is not just a future possibility; it is here now. In many ways, "nonlethals" are more frightening than nuclear weapons. Once they proliferate, it will be too late to stop them.

We need to insist on immediate action by our government, jointly with other countries, to prevent the exploitation of biotechnology in ways that could threaten not just life but human autonomy and the most basic human rights.

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