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US wants tough bioweapons ban, but no verification AP Associated Press

By Elaine Engeler

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GENEVA - The United States unveiled a strategy yesterday to crack down on biological weapons that doesn't include any international enforcement, continuing the Bush administration's rejection of binding verification plans.

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Ellen Tauscher, the US undersecretary of state for arms control, said she wanted to revitalize the Biological Weapons Convention, which Washington walked out of in 2001 when it rejected international monitoring of military and pharmaceutical research.

But Tauscher expressed the same key reservation.

"The Obama administration will not seek to revive negotiations on a verification protocol to the convention," she told diplomats in Geneva.

The 1972 convention prohibits the development, trade, and use of biological weapons such as anthrax, smallpox, and other toxins that could bring devastating effects to civilian populations. But the Cold War treaty was drawn up without enforcement provisions.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, diplomats began negotiating a new protocol for the ban that would have opened up signing countries to international monitoring.

The talks dragged on for almost a decade and were nearly finished, when the Bush administration suddenly pulled out shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks.

At the time, Washington said the proposed inspection system would not work and would expose US secrets to enemies and rivals.

There have been no advances in global disarmament talks since.

"Our long-term goal is to develop mechanisms to verify compliance with this convention," said Swedish Ambassador Magnus Hellgren, who was representing the 27-nation European Union.

Hellgren, one of about 100 diplomats who saw Tauscher's presentation, said the United States was making a "welcome contribution."

But he told the Associated Press he would reserve his verdict on the Obama administration's commitment to the process until 2011, when the entire convention will be reviewed.

Tauscher noted that the danger from biological agents has grown with the development of new science and global terrorism.

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But she said "it is extraordinarily difficult to verify compliance."

A binding treaty on verification "would not be able to keep pace with the rapidly changing nature of the biological weapons threat," Tauscher said.

She added countries should act in a "voluntary" manner to build greater confidence in the convention.

Tibor Toth, a Hungarian diplomat who chaired the biological talks until their 2001 collapse, said the US support was significant.

"The threat is not diminishing," he told the AP by telephone from Vienna, adding that new dangers from biological weapons would need new approaches.

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