

## **Uzbekistan: Anthrax Alert**

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There are fears that Uzbekistan faces an anthrax threat from Bin Laden sympathisers and Soviet-era biological weapons.

The Uzbek authorities fear Bin Laden supporters may launch anthrax attacks against the country, in retaliation for its support for the US military campaign in Afghanistan.

But, it seems, live anthrax spores buried by the Soviets over ten years ago at a biological weapons testing site on an island in the Aral Sea pose an even greater threat.

Tashkent's unwavering cooperation with the US - it has allowed the American military to use air bases in the south of the country - has already drawn threats from Afghanistan's ruling Taleban movement.

The deputy director of the Tashkent mail centre, Mahamajon Nizamov, assured the public recently that tough security measures were in place at all post offices around Uzbekistan following the anthrax attacks in the US.

"Personal protective devices have been issued to all our employees, including surgical gloves and masks, " he said." We have also briefed our staff to handle all letters and packages with care, and to alert us to any unusual or suspicious mail immediately."

Washington is also concerned about the possible outbreak of anthrax in Uzbekistan. A source at the US Embassy in Uzbekistan told IWPR all incoming mail was being screened for bacterial spores before it reached the internal mailboxes.

But it appears that a far greater threat lies on the island of Vozrozhdeniya in the Aral Sea, in north-western Uzbekistan, where, according to recently declassified information, a consignment of canned weapons-grade anthrax, brought from Russia and buried here more than a decade ago, remains active.

With the island now bridged to the mainland, as a result of the desiccation of the Aral Sea, the chances of the contamination spreading have increased substantially. Akhmet Sergaziev, a local bacteriologist, says there have been several anthrax-linked deaths in the area in recent years.

Biological weapons were tested on Vozrozhdeniye until the late 1980s. Known at various times as Aralsk-7, Barkhan, and Field Research Lab 52, the testing ground remained the highest-security military compound in the Soviet Union until 1992.

No accurate information is available as to what kind of research was conducted inside the secure compound. Some of the documentation has been destroyed, and the rest is buried deep in the secret archives of the Russian defence ministry.

According to the US Scientists' Federation, biological experiments were first carried out on the island in 1936, when a group of scientists led by Ivan Velikanov came to study the controlled propagation of rabbit fever. A year later, Velikanov was arrested by Stalin's secret police, and experiments were suspended for 15 years.

Testing was resumed in 1952, and the compound was expanded. By the end of the 1980s, the site had grown significantly. A three-storey lab was fitted with state-of-the-art technology, including a hermetically-sealed chamber equipped to handle bacteria. It was surrounded by refrigeration chambers, power generators and various storage facilities.

The military was convinced the island was ideally suited for biological testing because northerly winds blew dangerous fallout away from residential areas and ample sunlight curbed the propagation of pathogenic micro-organisms.

The lethal bacterial cultures, including anthrax, rabbit fever, brucellosis, pestilence, and typhoid were nurtured at defence factories in Kirov, Sverdlovsk, Zagorsk and Stepnogorsk, Kazakstan. They were tested on mice, hamsters and guinea-pigs. Some sources indicate that, by the 1980s, bacterial cultures were genetically engineered.

By the 1970s, the Soviet Union was fully equipped for biological warfare, with an arsenal ranging from rabbit fever, which kills only one per cent of those infected while leaving the rest of the population temporarily paralysed, to pestilence, which can destroy a whole population.

In 1988, the USSR faced international exposure for producing anthrax spores in violation of the 1972 international convention that banned production and testing of biological weapons. To avoid the scandal, the anthrax spores were sealed in special containers at a top-secret defence installation near Ekaterinburg, and taken to Vozrozhdeniye, where they were buried underground.

According to declassified records, tests at the underground depository on the island have revealed that the spores are still very much alive, despite strong detoxification treatment. The Uzbek authorities have publicly acknowledged this. Recently, Washington decided to allocate 6 million dollars for making safe the former testing site.

But it may already be too late. The drying out of the Aral Sea, caused by the long-term overuse of its waters for agriculture, has turned Vozrozhdeniye, as well as the island of Komsomolsky, a former biological testing ground south of it, into peninsulas.

Rodents, notorious carriers of infection, are free to cross the dry seabed to the mainland, and contaminated dust and sand blows ashore. Farm animals, which frequently use the islands as pasture, can also spread infection.

Plague control laboratories in Uzbekistan complain, meanwhile, about the run-down state of their facilities, their lack of equipment, pharmaceuticals and qualified labour. They say half of the farm animals in villages close to where the island joins the mainland have not been receiving preventative vaccinations.

Although Uzbekistan is ready to deal with anthrax through the mail, it appears unequipped to deal with the threat posed by the biological testing sites on Vozrozhdeniye.

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