The Open Regulations website and the website of the Ministry of Industry and Infrastructural Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan recently published information on the Kazakh government’s intention to build a “BSL-4 laboratory and underground storage facility for a collection of dangerous and highly dangerous strains” in the south of the country in the Korday district of Zhambyl Region in the village of Gvardeisky. It is where the Research Institute for Biological Security Problems, now part of the Science Committee of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which now works mainly on Pentagon research programmes, has been located since Soviet times. The “Laboratory” is scheduled to start construction at the beginning of 2022 and be completed in the Q4 2025. Its code BSL-4 stands for Biosafety Level 4.

An explanatory note from Kazakh Minister Beibut Atamkulov states that Deputy Prime Minister Yeraly Tugzhanov gave the relevant instruction on October 25. Section 3 of the project document hints that no funds from the budget would be required to build such a hazardous facility, suggesting the involvement of the US Department of Defense’s Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), which has already been allocated funds for this “project”.

Thus, this “laboratory” may become the seventh Pentagon facility in Kazakhstan to be involved in the DTRA network of military biolaboratories disguised as alleged local disease outbreaks, becoming an integral part of the US military biological infrastructure in Eurasia and the post-Soviet space. It could be an obvious complement to the existing Central Reference Laboratory (CRL) built in Almaty in 2016. However, the said “Laboratory” will have nothing to do
with local disease outbreaks, as it is already known that it will hold various strains of Africa’s most dangerous
diseases, such as the Ebola virus, as well as Marburg virus, smallpox and many others. And there are simply no real
countermeasures against many of these pathogens. It turns out that DTRA will bring all these pathogens not only for
storage, but also to study, upgrade and test on humans and local fauna.

In connection with the forthcoming construction of the “Laboratory”, the government of the Republic of Kazakhstan
was forced to make the project public, in particular through the little-known website Open Regulations, where, until
November 19, citizens of Kazakhstan were given the opportunity to submit their views on the issue. Of the thousands
citizen submissions already published on the Open Regulations website, not a single one supports the project, with
people of all nationalities strongly opposing it.

In fact, the “Laboratory” in question, given its funding by and reporting to the Pentagon alone, must be regarded as
a veritable US military base. There is no doubt that the push by the United States through the government of
Kazakhstan to build this military facility is the Pentagon’s response to its refusal to allow troops to be withdrawn
from Afghanistan to the former Soviet Central Asian republics. Under these circumstances, Washington has thus
found a way to maintain its military and political presence in Central Asia in the form of already new laboratories
and a similar depot on the territory of Kazakhstan.

However, the disclosure by the Kazakh authorities of their intention to build the “Laboratory” in question with the
participation of the US military department is at odds with the official assurances of the Kazakh authorities that no
bacteriological weapons are being produced in the country and that there are no US military biologists. The US
actually continues to heavily fund and oversee all existing US biolaboratories in Kazakhstan and intends to build new
ones. Specialists from Russia and China have still not been allowed into these sites, despite repeated requests from
the diplomatic departments of these states.

However, it should be recalled that today’s globalized world increasingly depends on the quality of implementation
of international agreements governing relations between countries. This is particularly important in areas such as
respect for human rights, environmental protection and the prohibition of weapons of mass destruction. However,
along the way, influential US politicians oppose the idea of an international system based on international treaties
because, in their view, they could “jeopardize US sovereignty”. Such a US stance is very dangerous, as it could make
a massive violation of international obligations a practice. This, in turn, could hit the US itself, since international
cooperation on disarmament and combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction has become crucial in
the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

With regard to the intentions of Kazakhstan and the US to build a new laboratory, it should also be taken into
account that the US has been rather reluctant to participate in reaching agreement on the Convention on the
Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on
their Destruction (BTWC). This Convention was signed in 1972 and entered into force in 1975. It banned the
development, production, storage and acquisition of biological agents that could be used as weapons and biological
weapons themselves. The Convention included a specific protocol that banned the use of even small amounts of
deadly microorganisms and poisons for research purposes. However, many senior officials opposed the protocol
because they believed it could damage US microbiological research companies. In July 2001, the Bush
Administration said it would not adhere to the requirements of the protocol “until it is amended”.

As a result, the US has since 2001 and to date continued to block attempts to reopen work on a legally binding
protocol to the BTWC, which is to date the only comprehensive international law instrument designed to
comprehensively address the risks of biological weapons.

In these circumstances, the public, not only in Kazakhstan, but in all other countries should prevent the construction
of another US military biolaboratory before Washington signs the BTWC protocol and allows the international public
to inspect existing US biolaboratories outside of their country.

_Vladimir Platov, expert on the Middle East, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”._