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NEWS RELEASE

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## US Armed Forces Push for Offensive Biological Weapons Development

(*Austin and Hamburg, 8 May 2002*) – US Navy and Air Force biotechnology laboratories are proposing development of offensive biological weapons. The weapons, genetically engineered microbes that attack items such as fuel, plastics and asphalt, would violate federal and international law. The proposals have been made by the Naval Research Laboratory (Washington, DC) and the Armstrong Laboratory (Brooks Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas). They date from 1997; but were recently submitted by the Marine Corps for a high-level assessment by a panel of the US National Academies of Science (NAS). The NAS panel (see website for members) has prepared a draft report; but it has not been released to the public.

The uncovering of these proposals for an offensive biological weapons program comes at a critical political juncture. The US has rejected a legally-binding system of United Nations inspections of suspected biological weapons facilities. At the same time, the Bush administration is aggressively accusing other countries of developing biological weapons and expanding its so-called "Axis of Evil" based in large part on allegations of foreign biological weapons development.

But it is increasingly apparent that there are serious questions about the United States' own compliance with the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC). While US allegations against other countries are generally undocumented, the proposals described in this press release were recently released to the Sunshine Project under the Freedom of Information Act and have been placed on the internet for independent analysis (See [www.sunshine-project.org](http://www.sunshine-project.org)).

**Explicitly for Offense:** In the murky world of biological weapons research, many technologies are "dual use", that is, they have both offensive and peaceful applications. The alleged transfer of dual use technologies, such as vaccine research, is a basis of charges made against Cuba on May 6<sup>th</sup> by US Under Secretary of State John Bolton. The US armed forces documents released here, however, are not about "dual use" technology, they are explicit proposals for offensive weaponsmaking.

According to the Naval Research Laboratory, "*It is the purpose of the proposed research to capitalize on the degradative potential of... naturally occurring microorganisms, and to engineer additional, focused degradative capabilities into [genetically modified microorganisms], to produce systems that will degrade the warfighting capabilities of potential adversaries.*" The Air Force proposes "*genetically engineered catalysts made by bacteria that destroy... Catalysts can be engineered to destroy whatever war material is desired.*" The proposals indicate these weapons might be used by all the armed forces, including the Special Forces and in peacekeeping and anti-narcotics operations.

**Additional Documents Suppressed:** These proposals are probably only the tip of the iceberg. For over one year, the Marine Corps has delayed response to a Sunshine Project Freedom of Information Act request that now includes 147 unclassified documents. The two proposals described here are part of a recent first release of 8 items from that request. 139 related legal and weapons development documents are unreleased. The Marine Corps says the delay is due to a lack of manpower.

The National Academies are also suppressing related documents. As part of the Marine Corps-commissioned study, in 2001 at least 77 apparently chemical and biological weapons-related documents were deposited in the NAS Public Access Records File, a library open for inspection and copying by all persons. After the Sunshine Project requested copies of these documents on March 12<sup>th</sup> 2002, the National Academies placed a "security hold" on the public file. High-ranking NAS officials have refused to explain who ordered the hold, or to offer a credible explanation as to why it exists. The Sunshine Project believes that NAS is under pressure from high-ranking US officials to "Enron" the public record to avoid release of politically sensitive material. Rather than assist a purge of the public record, NAS - a leading US non-profit scientific body - must condemn and release the proposals for illegal weapons that it has received.

**Legal Implications:** The research proposed by the Air Force and Navy raises serious legal questions. Under the US Biological Weapons Anti-Terrorism Act, development of biological weapons, including those that attack materials, is subject to federal criminal and civil penalties. The Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, which the US and 143 other countries have ratified, prohibits development, acquisition, and stockpiling of any biological agents not justifiable for peaceful or prophylactic purposes. There is no such justification for the offensive research proposed by the Navy and Air Force. The proposals are certain to weigh heavily on all countries' minds as they prepare for November's reconstituted 5<sup>th</sup> Review Conference of the BTWC.