

Pentagon Leaders Say Preparing for a Biological Attack is Among Lessons Learned from Pandemic



Naval Aircrewmen (Tactical Helicopter) 2nd Class Isaac Lynn with Helicopter Maritime Strike Squadron 37 attached to the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS William P. Lawrence, verifies his information with U.S. Army Capt. Danielle Crawford, Joint Task Force-Bravo Combat Support Hospital commander prior to a COVID test at Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras, Nov. 26. U.S. Navy / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Russell Scoggin

ARLINGTON, Va. – Among the lessons learned from the coronavirus pandemic is a better understanding of what it will take to defend against a biological attack or other weapons of mass destruction, leaders of the U.S. Navy and Defense departments said Dec. 2.

“We are today a better force, prepared for nuclear, biological, chemical warfare in the future because of the lessons we’ve learned from this pandemic,” Navy Secretary Kenneth Braithwaite told a Senate hearing on Navy and Marine Corps readiness.

The novel coronavirus, COVID-19, “caught the [Navy] Department off-guard, as it did the entire world,” Braithwaite told Senate Armed Services Committee’s Readiness and Management Support subcommittee, adding, “the Navy in particular struggled through the early weeks of this because the close proximity in which our Sailors live aboard ship made this a real threat to our ability to operate at sea.”

He praised Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday for

identifying ways to mitigate the risk and “keep our ships operating. We have over 100 ships today at sea.”

In a separate, live-streamed discussion the same day at a Washington think tank, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said it wasn't likely a nation state would attack the United States with a biological weapon but he was more concerned that a terrorist organization might try.

“We know some organizations are, in fact, looking into that,” Milley told viewers on the Brookings Institution's website. “They don't have that yet, but it's something that's a possibility, something we need to be on guard against.”

In addition to “interdicting, disrupting and destroying any capability” to weaponize a virus or other disease, Milley said “we also need to take the lessons learned from this current pandemic and roll those into capabilities to defend ourselves,” including stockpiles of PPE (personal protective equipment), organizations capable of rapid deployment, protocols and procedures to limit the effects of any biological weapon.

“We have a very rigorous lessons learned program ongoing with the current crisis,” he added.

At the Senate hearing, Gilday said the Pentagon is working closely with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on two plans to distribute COVID-19 vaccine. Ten Defense Department locations across the continental United States will distribute Pfizer's vaccine, which must be stored at minus 70 degrees Celsius. Three or four overseas locations will distribute the Moderna vaccine, which only requires refrigeration at minus 20 degrees Celsius for up to 30 days before use.

The vaccination plan grew out of lessons learned from the Defense Department's tiered COVID-19 testing program, Gilday said. It calls for health care and emergency and safety

personnel to be vaccinated first because they're more likely to be in contact with the infected, strategic forces, such as the crews on nuclear missile submarines, followed by forces to be deployed within the next three months.