

International Workshop on the Biological Weapons Convention Supporting Global Health: Reducing Biological Risk by Building Capacity in Health Security

Oslo, 18-19 June 2009

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on behalf of the Chair of the 2009 meetings of the BWC

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

As Chair of this year's meetings of the Biological Weapons Convention, Canada is delighted that the governments of Norway and Indonesia, along with the Implementation Support Unit, have organised this important workshop. Last year's workshop in Jakarta was by all accounts highly successful in raising awareness of on biosafety and biosecurity across Southeast Asia, and made a significant and very constructive contribution to the BWC Meeting of Experts and Meeting of States Parties in 2008. I am therefore pleased that Indonesia and Norway are continuing their efforts to support the BWC intersessional work programme, and have organised this workshop which deals with a topic highly relevant to this year's Meeting of Experts. I would like to thank both governments for their commitment and dedication to supporting the work of the BWC, and for the generous resources and time they have devoted to convening this workshop.

This workshop is a unique and perhaps daring attempt to bring together in an innovative and constructive way two important areas of the BWC that have at one time or another been highly controversial. The first area is the implementation of Article X of the Convention, and the second is the relationship between the BWC and public health.

Implementation of Article X in the BWC has been bedevilled by debates about the relative weight given to security (or "regulatory aspects") versus development of the peaceful uses of biology ("promotional aspects"). Similar debates have afflicted other arms control and non-proliferation instruments, but the struggle has been particularly bitter in the BWC, where "peaceful uses" involve such things as the production of life-saving drugs and vaccines. At times, the discourse has been depressingly antagonistic and tit-for-tat, with gains in one area seen as coming at the expense of losses in the other, and vice versa. But one of the most significant results of the BWC's intersessional work program is that this stark dichotomy is starting to fade. It is being replaced by the recognition that security measures are a *means of enabling* the peaceful applications of technology and promoting development, and conversely that promoting development and technology transfer is a *means of increasing* security. This workshop offers an excellent opportunity to explore, in a constructive and collegial atmosphere, ways in which this mutually reinforcing cycle can be further strengthened and expanded, and Article X implementation driven forward in a practical and concrete way.

As for the second issue, there was a time in the not-so-distant past when the issues of biological weapons and public health were kept a politically discreet distance apart. Some States Parties were understandably anxious about compromising the neutrality of international agencies such as the WHO and OIE (World Organisation for Animal Health) by

involving them in security and non-proliferation issues. But again, the intersessional work program has shown that these legitimate concerns can be effectively managed in practice, and that there is much to be gained from a combined, coordinated approach to tackling the related threats of deliberate and naturally-occurring diseases. Indeed, the very fact that the Sixth Review Conference allocated an entire year of the 2007-2011 intersessional work programme to "capacity building in the fields of disease surveillance, detection, diagnosis and containment" demonstrates that the States Parties now fully recognise the connection between public health and biological weapons. At the same time, the adoption of the WHO's revised International Health Regulations (IHR) in 2005 has provided a sound basis for the closer integration of WHO and BWC activities on disease surveillance, as well as a useful channel through which to direct practical capacity-building efforts under Article X of the BWC.

This connection – including in animal and plant health, as well as human – is worth exploring carefully, and it is my hope that this workshop will help to identify new avenues of cooperation and opportunities for coordinated action. I encourage you to be creative, and to look beyond the traditional range of issues. It is fairly obvious, for example, that many of the preparations and investments made in public health also serve as useful tools against biological weapons and bioterrorism: early detection and rapid response are vital for both natural and deliberate outbreaks of disease. It is less obvious that there are synergies to be found in the other direction, but in fact there are: a 2005 article in the US journal *Biosecurity and Bioterrorism* described how bioterrorism preparedness measures in the US had proved unexpectedly useful in rapidly controlling a completely natural outbreak of tuberculosis originating in a Virginia hospital¹.

I mentioned that the BWC's intersessional work programme had been instrumental in changing perceptions on both Article X and on the relationship between the BWC and public health. It is worth considering how this happened. The intersessional process, pulled from the wreckage of the Fifth Review Conference in 2002, was originally expected by most observers to be little more than a time-filling exercise, to keep the sputtering flame of multilateralism alive until the Sixth Review Conference in 2006. As it happened, the series of expert meetings on selected topics proved to be a highly fertile exchange of ideas, experiences and opportunities. Links were uncovered and synergies revealed. Health, law enforcement, legal, defence and scientific experts swapped notes and realised they had a lot more in common than they had thought. Sometimes these connections were made within a single national delegation; certainly the inter-agency consultations and preparations that took place in many capitals strengthened national capacities against biological weapons, purely through improved communication and coordination.

This communication and coordination brought convergence on a common purpose: reducing biological risks through sharing experience and knowledge, and through building skills and capacity. Many of the "traditional" divisions and differences now seemed irrelevant and counterproductive. The BWC intersessional process has proved to be an excellent example of applying a network approach to a complex problem, incorporating the perspectives and expertise of a range of organisations and actors. The second incarnation of this process, launched by the Sixth Review Conference in 2006, has already delivered constructive and practical results on national implementation, regional cooperation, biosafety, biosecurity, the oversight of science, education and awareness raising, and codes of conduct.

¹ Renden, Welch and Kaplowitz, "Leveraging Bioterrorism Preparedness for Nonbioterrorism Events: A Public Health Example" in *Biosecurity and Bioterrorism: Biodefense Strategy, Practice, and Science*, Vol. 3 No. 4, 2005

Now we have the opportunity to apply this successful approach to building capacity in the fields of disease surveillance, detection, diagnosis and containment. The Meeting of Experts, to be held in Geneva from 24 to 28 August 2009, will bring together a wide range of national and international experts on this topic. They will share experiences and advice, consider challenges and obstacles, and discuss ideas and solutions. An important part of the meeting will be devoted to considering specific offers of, and requests for, assistance for building capacity. There will be a poster session on this theme, and Canada is encouraging all delegations to come prepared with specific offers or requests, according to their circumstances, capabilities and needs.

The Canadian government through its various agencies has been active in providing capacity building and international assistance to many developing nations. Our Global Partnership Program is currently increasing biosafety and biosecurity in Central Asia, through the construction of a high level containment laboratory in the Kyrgyz Republic, providing technical and financial assistance to the Biosafety Association for Central Asia and the Caucasus (BACAC), and by upgrading safety and security in microbiology labs throughout that region. Our Counter-Terrorism Capacity-Building Program has been working at enhancing disease surveillance in South-East Asia, improving Foot-and-Mouth Disease preparedness and response in South America, and strengthening the capacity of health care systems and workers in the Caribbean Region with the help of the Pan American Health Organisation, allowing them to respond safely and effectively to biological outbreaks. The Public Health Agency of Canada has ongoing projects in South-East Asia with funding from the Canadian International Development Agency and most recently provided significant assistance to Mexico with the H1N1 Virus pandemic.

As Chair of the BWC Meeting of States Parties, Canada strongly advocates an action-based outcome, where our meetings will lead to enhancements in capacity. We intend to work closely with States Parties to ensure a productive consensus outcome that helps to strengthen the Convention and enhance the use of biology for peaceful purposes. This workshop will make an important contribution towards meeting that goal. Once again I would like to express my appreciation to the organisers, and indeed to all the participants.

I wish you a productive and stimulating discussion, and we look forward to hearing the outcome at the Meeting of Experts in August.

Thank you.
