

**BRINGING BIOLOGISTS ON BOARD:
Looking Back on the Work of the Biological Weapons Convention in 2008**

Statement by Ambassador Georgi Avramchev
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Thank you for inviting me to speak at this conference. I believe that meetings such as this are so very important. The issues we are addressing are of growing importance to us all as members of societies that stand to benefit from the application of biology for economic development, the fight against hunger and dealing with disease. At the same time, we are also collectively threatened by biology being used for hostile purposes. I am sure that our work here will strengthen ties between the scientific and policy making communities and together we can shape an environment which ensures that advances in biology and biotechnology yield as many benefits as possible, while minimizing their potential for malign use.

Throughout the course of this year and at many locations around the world, I have attended, participated in, and chaired meetings dedicated to exploring how we might go about creating such an environment. Time and time again, I have heard the importance of balancing the pursuit of science (to safeguard our futures) with security (to protect our present). I am now convinced that to do this, we need to create a space in which we feel confident that biological resources are being used responsibly, while allowing scientists to retain the necessary freedoms to pursue cutting-edge research, develop commercial applications, and continue to drive progress. Developing robust but practical biosecurity regimes will help us achieve this.

The Biological Weapons Convention

For those of you not familiar with the BWC, it is the international treaty that bans the use of biology for hostile purposes. Although considered to be one of the major pillars of the international community dealing with weapons of mass destruction, in practice the BWC addresses how science interacts with society. After all, the treaty was created to ensure that the life sciences are used only for the benefit of humanity. It matches prohibitions (ensuring that the life sciences are not used for malign purposes) against protections for scientific freedom (enshrining the right to conduct scientific activities for peaceful purposes).

Members of the BWC realised at the turn of the century that because of the pervasiveness of biotechnology and rapidity of change and development in the biosciences, governments alone could not confront the threat of biological weapons in the traditional arms control sense. No government or international organisation can hope to monitor the tens of thousands of small biotechnology facilities spreading around the world. The number of facilities and the capability of the technology are ever increasing, while the cost and size of the equipment drops steadily. Member states of the BWC developed a new approach, one that incorporates the efforts of a broader community and not only those of the defence and security sectors. The BWC now also actively pursues partnerships with the public health, agriculture, law enforcement, and education sectors, as well as the international scientific community and commercial industry. If the potential problem lies in many hands, runs the logic, so must the solution.

Current BWC Initiatives

At the moment, the BWC meets each year to consider ways to improve its implementation. It hosts two meetings: one in the summer at the 'expert level', where world experts on technical aspects of the issues under consideration assemble; and the other at the end of the year, at the 'diplomatic level', to consider how best to place the technical discussions of the Meeting of Experts into the political framework of the BWC. These meetings deal with issues agreed upon by all members in advance and are those thought to be particularly important in the global fight against the deliberate spread of disease. They help the treaty's efforts to stay relevant in our rapidly evolving world.

This year we have dealt with:

- National, regional and international measures to improve biosafety and biosecurity, including laboratory safety and security of pathogens and toxins; and
- Oversight, education, awareness raising, and adoption and/or development of codes of conduct with the aim of preventing misuse in the context of advances in bio-science and bio-technology research with the potential of use for purposes prohibited by the Convention.

The Meeting of Experts convened in Geneva from 18 to 22 August to begin work on these important topics, both of which go to the heart of improving effective national implementation of the Convention. Participation in the meeting was impressively broad: 96 States Parties were represented, and just under 500 delegates participated in the meeting. Of these, around 180 were experts who had travelled from capitals. Importantly, participation from developing countries is increasing: 53% of the participating states were developing countries, up from 51% in 2007 and 48% in 2005. In the lead up to the Meeting of Experts, I asserted that this was an opportunity to 'Bring Biologists on Board' and we certainly managed that. The meetings generated a great deal of relevant information, including through background papers, working papers, statements and presentations, panel discussions as well as compendiums of national approaches. When the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) extracted the various substantive ideas and proposals, the list was 40 pages long.

The challenge was then to process this raw data to make it more manageable, accessible and useful. This was the job of the Meeting of States Parties. For this reason, the tag-line of our recent December meeting was 'Refinement, Structure & Focus'. As a first step in this process, I had the ISU process the raw data to remove duplicates, combine common points and structure it in a more logical manner. This document was fed into the Meeting of States Parties as a tool to help states in their preparations. This synthesis, however, is more than a tool for diplomats; it has already been adopted by 'in-the-field experts' and used as the basis of at least one assistance programme to strengthen a national biosafety and biosecurity framework.

During the course of the Meeting of States Parties, which was held in Geneva from 1 to 5 December, the content of this document was reviewed, debated and distilled to a series of common understandings. These understandings form the core of the output of this year's meetings and represent a shared vision amongst the 162 members of the BWC, as to what they need to do at a national level, to improve biosafety, biosecurity, the oversight of science,

education and awareness raising. States Parties also agreed to report back in 2011 on progress they have made on these issues. The full details of what was agreed will be available shortly as part of the report of the meeting. This will be posted, as soon as it is available, on the BWC website (www.unog.ch/bwc/meeting).

BWC Output for 2008

During the course of the year, the BWC meetings have produced a range of tangible outputs: background documentation acts as an important summary of thinking on these issues in 2008; reports of the meetings provide distilled versions of expert input; original inputs from experts from around the world, when combined, also form an important resource – one unique in both its size and its variety; the working documents, which retain enough details to be useful whilst being sufficiently refined to be practical, have become important tools in their own right; and equally, some tools developed for this year, such as the compendiums of national approaches, will be updated and continue to evolve as additional information become available – hopefully proving useful input for future efforts in these areas.

But not all of the outputs are so easily quantifiable. BWC meetings in 2008 have also provided important opportunities for networking, collaboration and community building. If the rhetoric of creating a shared solution to a common problem is to have meaning, we must have a sense of community amongst those of us working on these issues. Perhaps the most important intangible contributions made by the BWC this year are towards this sense of community. Participating in meetings like this, seeing old and new friends in these fields at different locations, at different times and playing host to such activities in Geneva have convinced me that a real community does exist and that it is vibrant, enthusiastic and an integral part of any solution.

Among the many ideas and proposals that covered in the tangible and intangible outputs, some are particularly relevant to this meeting. As I mentioned earlier, balance is critical: we heard repeatedly of the need for proportional measures, for carefully assessing risks, for balancing security concerns against the need for nurturing research and ensuring the peaceful development of biological science and technology. The value of risk assessment, management and communication were repeatedly stressed as being useful tools for finding some of these balances.

Another central theme was that of “no one size fits all”: no matter whether we are talking about standards for biosafety and biosecurity, or codes of conduct, it is clear that States Parties and other actors recognize that individual and local circumstances must be taken into account when addressing these issues.

The BWC: A regime that delivers

Back in April, I addressed a meeting very similar to this, the 2nd International Forum on Biosecurity held in Budapest, Hungary. At that meeting I outlined what I thought we would be able to achieve this year. I would like to use this opportunity to review how well we have done.

In April, I suggested we would:

- Forge new relationships between the BWC and the scientific community – we have changed the way we work in Geneva to increase access for scientists and have succeeded in drawing record levels of expertise to our meetings.
- Improve our engagement with industry and the private sector to make it more representative of the status of global biotechnology – we have held dedicated events for members of the private sector and seen participation rise from developing countries. There is still room to do much better on this and I will be recommending to my successor that he continue to work on this.
- Make space for contributions from international and regional organizations, as well as professional and scientific societies and academia – the meeting of experts had dedicated working sessions, side events, panel discussions and poster sessions, all to provide opportunities for input from stakeholder communities.
- Explore what we can do with risk management – in August we held a panel discussion dedicated to this topic, it formed a core element of the output of the Meeting of Experts, the synthesis paper and the common understandings of the Meeting of States Parties.
- Produce authoritative sets of information on each of the topics under consideration – the background papers produced for the August meeting have been referenced as a comprehensive snapshot of the state of affairs. The papers and presentations for the meetings are an unparalleled dataset and the compendiums provide easy access to details of relevant activities being undertaken in different countries.
- Develop new tools to improve the way we work and share information – the inclusion of poster sessions in our timetable was universally appreciated. Efforts to create new online tools, such as the compendiums, have added depth to our meetings. We continue to evolve interactive elements, such as the panel discussion, to make the most use of the expertise present at our meetings.
- Identify useful components for developing or revising national regimes for biosafety and biosecurity, oversight, education and raising awareness – the breadth and depth of the common understandings found in the report of the Meeting of States Parties more than met my expectations what we could achieve and is testimony to the dedicated and constructive efforts of the States Parties.

Conclusion

In conclusion, biology is booming. Biotechnology is advancing at an unprecedented rate, and beginning to find applications that have a direct impact on the way we all live our lives. Biology offers us benefits for health, agriculture, industry, manufacturing, and the environment. We cannot afford to see progress in these fields impeded. Biotechnology capacity must continue to spread around the globe, and its benefits must be widely shared. The challenge that confronts us now is how best to ensure that these powerful new capabilities yield as many benefits as possible, while minimizing their potential for malign use. We must find new and improved ways of working together and develop understandings and approaches shared across geographic, cultural and sectoral boundaries. I believe that this year's meetings of the Biological Weapons Convention have made a giant leap forwards, towards achieving this goal. I hope that we are able to build upon this progress over coming years and that everyone here today will be an active partner in these collective efforts.
