

**CONFRONTING BIOLOGICAL THREATS:
Biosecurity, Biological Weapons Nonproliferation
and Regional Cooperative Mechanisms**

Remarks by Ambassador Georgi Avramchev
Chairman of the 2008 Meetings of the Biological Weapons Convention

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

Although I cannot be with you in person, I would like to thank the organisers of this timely and important meeting for this opportunity to address you all. Your efforts in Jordan deal with issues that will likely form a cornerstone of international peace and security over coming decades. 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. Biotechnology capacity is spreading to all areas of the globe. More and more people have access to advances in biology. One of the major challenges of this century will be to ensure that these powerful new capabilities yield as many benefits as possible, while minimizing the potential for malign use.

I believe that your meeting has identified several key approaches. For our collective benefit, we must work to ensure that biology and biotechnology make progress in safe and secure environments. Biotechnology offers us enormous potential in health, agriculture, industry, the economy and the environment. We must ensure that this great potential is kept from the hands of those who would use it to do us harm. We must develop oversight frameworks for safety and security that will provide firm foundations for collective and collaborative work in the biological sciences. Robust regimes will provide a space in which we can feel confident biological resources are being used responsibly.

Your meeting also plays an important role because of its focus on improving **regional** cooperation. Such regional action is a priority issue for the Biological Weapons Convention. At meetings last year, the members of the BWC formally recognised the value of regional activity. They endorsed activities, such as this meeting, which support their work at the international level, and which complement the various national efforts. Countries in a region often share similarities in history, society, language and legal backgrounds, and cooperation across a region can provide tangible benefits. I know from my own experiences that regional partners often bring fresh thinking, different insights, additional knowledge and complementary experiences to the table. I hope that this meeting marks an important milestone on the path towards even greater engagement on these issues in your region.

The BWC sits at the nexus between science and security. It 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). Negotiated over 35 years ago, the BWC is an elegant and concise piece of international law which has largely succeeded in establishing a global norm against the development, acquisition or use of biological weapons. Today, no government would claim that biological weapons could ever play a legitimate role in national defence.

But legal prohibition is one thing; operation and enforcement in the face of an evolving threat is another. It has become clear to members of the BWC that because of the pervasiveness of biotechnology and the rapidity of development in the biosciences, governments alone cannot 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.

To meet this challenge, the members of the BWC developed a new approach to incorporate all complementary efforts - not only those of the defence and security sectors, but also those found in 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.

Annual meetings form the backbone of this new approach. Each year the BWC hosts international meetings on specific topics agreed upon by all members in advance. These meetings are designed to discuss, and promote common understanding and effective action on these topics. The meetings have proven highly successful in bridging gaps between the viewpoints of members and creating an atmosphere of practical and constructive collaboration. This year the BWC meetings are considering two topics:

- 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.

From 18 to 22 August, almost 500 participants from 103 states, 11 international organisations and a host of professional, scientific, academic, private sector and non-governmental organisations gathered in Geneva for the Meeting of Experts, to begin looking at these topics. A huge amount of material was contributed and discussed: ideas, proposals, experiences, wisdom. The meeting also provided a vital opportunity for experts from around the world to exchange information, network, make contacts and build working relationships. Regional meetings such as yours can feed into our work. I would encourage you to come to our Meeting of States Parties in December, to report on your discussions and conclusions. That would be a most valuable contribution to our efforts.

Neither the BWC nor any other process or initiative can, by itself, hope to address the threats posed by biological weapons. Although the BWC is the world's foremost forum on these issues, it works closely in concert with parallel international processes, regional initiatives, and national activities. Meetings, such as yours, perform a crucial role. They are an integral part of collective efforts to ensure that the life sciences are used solely for the benefit of humanity. I wish you a fruitful and productive discussion over the coming days, and offer the organisers my congratulations for all their efforts.
