

Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention
Meeting of Experts
July 16-20, 2012

Cooperation and Assistance

Submitted by the United States of America

Background

The Seventh Review Conference (RevCon) established a standing agenda item on “cooperation and assistance, with a particular focus on strengthening cooperation and assistance under Article X,” consisting of seven sub-items. The United States welcomes this opportunity to discuss means of strengthening States Parties’ collaboration to support implementation of the Convention, including the goals of advancing the life sciences and facilitating access to relevant knowledge and materials for peaceful purposes. This paper sets out U.S. ideas on how this standing agenda item could usefully be addressed, both procedurally and substantively.

Promoting Cooperation and Assistance

If the objective is to strengthen and increase cooperation and assistance in the life sciences – a very broad area – then a thoughtful and constructive approach is called for; one that takes into account the broad range and varied forms of international cooperation already taking place; identifies specific priorities, gaps, and needs; and explores practical ways to address these. The focus should, moreover, be on those areas not sufficiently addressed in other fora, or where the BTWC can play a meaningful complementary role. Many issues directly relevant to improving international cooperation in the life sciences – for example, uneven enforcement of international intellectual property rights, or a wide range of regulatory and other barriers to trade and investment relevant to the life sciences – are first and foremost the responsibility of other international fora. It will be important to recognize the primacy of these other fora in their areas of responsibility, or the BTWC will risk eroding its credibility while also losing its appropriate focus on developing its own tools for enhanced cooperation, bolstering capacity-building, mitigating strategic risks, deepening mutual confidence, and improving transparency in the health security arena.

The core of the BTWC effort should be review and discussion of the national reports on implementation of Article X agreed to by States Parties at the 2011 RevCon. Such reports will play an essential role in broadening awareness of the many ways in which States Parties fulfill their Article X undertakings, the challenges they encounter, and in documenting areas of need. As a result, they have the potential to make debate specific, substantive, and productive. In this regard, the submission of clear, specific, and timely reports is central to making progress.

One of the sub-items established by the RevCon directs States Parties to examine ways and means to target and mobilize resources to address gaps and areas of need. While a variety of means can be imagined to mobilize resources, common to almost all of them is the importance of identifying specific needs at an early stage. This permits an assessment of the resources required and the

benefits that might stem from addressing the needs. It facilitates identifying the appropriate expertise and assistance to be provided and makes it far easier to secure funding from potential donors who seek specificity when considering competing claims on their resources. Therefore, identifying specific gaps and areas of need is a priority.

Based upon a review of reports submitted to the Seventh RevCon and discussion with international partners, the United States has identified several distinct areas of need that should be priorities for efforts under the BTWC to strengthen international cooperation and assistance:

- Biosafety and biosecurity: The growth in biosafety associations around the world is evidence of growing interest in these topics. Almost two-thirds of the associations that make up the International Federation of Biosafety Associations [IFBA] were established within the last five years. Increasingly, these associations are also engaged in promoting laboratory biosecurity. Biosafety and biosecurity are now understood to be complementary approaches, brought together under the overarching framework of “biorisk management.” The U.S. strongly supports these efforts and urges other governments to support their broad-ranging work, both nationally and collectively, through the BTWC intersessional process and other appropriate fora.
- Disease surveillance, detection, reporting and response: A significant number of World Health Organization Member States are believed to be seeking extensions for the 2012 deadline for compliance with the International Health Regulations (IHR) (2005). This development suggests the existence of gaps and corresponding areas of need that would be vital to have addressed in the event of a deliberate biological attack, regardless of origin. BTWC States Parties that are seeking such extensions should be encouraged to share specific needs and explore options for addressing them collaboratively.
- Global capacity to prepare for, and respond to, a biological incident: This will be a key agenda item during intersessional meetings in 2014 and 2015, but it is one that requires international cooperation both in developing national capacities as well as in developing cooperative mechanisms for effective assistance. Given the limited time available for work on these issues, States Parties should be encouraged now to begin efforts to identify impediments to effective international assistance and develop practicable options to address them.
- National implementation, including confidence-building measures: Establishing and enforcing comprehensive national implementation measures is important to address evolving BW threats, especially from non-state actors. While some recent limited progress in CBM implementation has been made, such as in greater public provision of the CBMs, the level of national implementation of the BTWC remains uneven, as do rates of participation in the CBMs. Experts should therefore consider options to ensure the availability of advice and other assistance in these areas, as well as means of encouraging States Parties to take advantage of such resources.

Recommendations

The 2012 Meeting of States Parties should:

1. Call on all States Parties to submit biennial reports on their implementation of Article X, as agreed by the Seventh RevCon, and urge that such reports be used, where appropriate, to identify specific gaps and needs that could usefully be addressed, as well as to highlight existing cooperation and exchange.
2. Call for increased efforts to develop and implement appropriate, sustainable, and effective laboratory biosafety and security measures, including guidelines, training materials and resources, and models for collaborative approaches to building and maintaining capacity.
3. Highly encourage BTWC States Parties seeking extensions under the IHR (2005) to share information about specific needs or challenges they have encountered with respect to the required core capacities, and urge those States Parties in a position to do so to explore means of assisting in meeting these challenges.
4. Call upon all States Parties to identify and report on specific impediments to the provision or receipt of international assistance in response to an attack or outbreak, to facilitate future work on the effective provision of international assistance.
5. Urge States Parties in a position to do so to offer assistance or training in support of national implementation tasks, such as drafting, implementing, and enforcing laws and regulations, as well as assistance in compiling and submitting CBMs. In this regard, the potential for assistance from civil society also should be noted.
6. Urge States Parties that have not submitted CBMs and those that lack comprehensive, fully-implemented national measures to avail themselves of this assistance.