

**2008 Meeting
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**Meeting of Experts
Geneva, 18-22 August 2008**
Item 5 of the provisional agenda
**Consideration of national, regional and
international measures to improve biosafety
and biosecurity, including laboratory safety
and security of pathogens and toxins**

AUSTRALIAN ASSISTANCE TO STRENGTHEN REGIONAL BIOSAFETY AND BIOSECURITY CAPACITY

Submitted by Australia

I. Introduction

1. Australia shares the global concern that two of the greatest threats to international security – terrorism and weapons of mass destruction – could merge to create an entirely new and more insidious threat: terrorist attacks with chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear materials. The Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) performs an important role in addressing bioterrorism threats by obliging States Parties to strengthen national biosafety and biosecurity measures. Article II, for example, explicitly connects biosafety to countering biological threats. Moreover, at the sixth Review Conference, States Parties reaffirmed that national implementation of the prohibitions specified in Article IV includes ensuring the safety and security of biological agents and toxins in facilities and during transportation, to prevent unauthorised access to and removal of such materials¹.

2. Australia has assisted States Parties in South-East Asia to strengthen biosafety and biosecurity, consistent with Article IV obligations. This paper outlines Australia's understanding of biosafety and biosecurity in relation to counter-bioterrorism, and provides an overview of key regional assistance programs.

¹ E.g. Final Document of the Sixth BWC Review Conference; BWC/CONF.VI/6, Art. III, para. 9, and Art. IV, para. 11(c).

II. Biosafety and biosecurity

3. There is no agreed definition of biosecurity and this has led to confusion with a related term, biosafety. For the purposes of our cooperation with counter-bioterrorism partners in South-East Asia, Australia understands that biosecurity comprises measures that minimise the possibility of biological agents being deliberately used to cause harm. This distinguishes it from biosafety, which involves measures aimed at protecting people and the environment from the unintentional impact of biological agents, and includes workplace health and safety issues and the prevention of the accidental release of such agents. Implementing effective biosecurity measures is an important means of addressing the bioterrorism threat.

4. Australia's understanding of biosafety and biosecurity accords with that of the World Health Organisation (WHO), which has defined **biosafety** as the containment principles, technologies and practices that are implemented to prevent the unintentional exposure to pathogens and toxins, or their accidental release². The WHO defines **laboratory biosecurity** as the protection, control and accountability for valuable biological materials within laboratories, in order to prevent their unauthorized access, loss, theft, misuse, diversion or intentional release.

5. In essence, biosafety protects people from dangerous germs, while biosecurity protects germs from dangerous people³. There is a close relationship between biosafety and biosecurity, but their objectives and attendant practices differ.

III. International counter-bioterrorism outreach

6. Australia has developed an international counter-bioterrorism strategy which recognises the unique challenges posed by bioterrorism. The aim is to protect the interests of Australia and others, by cooperating with partner countries in South-East Asia, including, where, possible through coordination of approaches to strengthen biosafety and laboratory biosecurity.

7. The program promotes cooperation and coordination, both in Australia and in partner countries, between traditional security (policy and operational) agencies and new players such as health and agriculture agencies which, traditionally, have had little involvement in counter-proliferation or counter-terrorism. These agencies have technical and administrative expertise and have adopted practices to mitigate the effects of natural diseases which can be adapted to protecting against deliberately propagated disease.

IV. Regional cooperation and assistance

8. Australia's international counter-bioterrorism strategy includes providing training, in consultation with regional counter-terrorism partners, in biosafety and biosecurity best practice. The Australian Animal Health Laboratory (AAHL) – one of Australia's leading research and diagnostic facilities – has spearheaded a series of regional workshops designed to enhance laboratory biosafety and biosecurity capacities. The practical training provided by AAHL has been complemented by discussion of international legal instruments, including the BWC, and consideration of contemporary issues for biological scientists such as the development and

² WHO/CDS/EPR/2006.6: *Biorisk Management: Laboratory Biosecurity Guidance*.

³ BWC Implementation Support Unit's *Background Paper on Biosafety and Biosecurity*.

adoption of codes of conduct. Participants have considered issues of concern to regional biological laboratories and explored challenges in designing new facilities.

9. Australia's regional assistance also includes coordinating and cooperating with partners in the Asia-Pacific region to prevent and prepare for emerging infectious diseases, particularly avian influenza. The Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) funds programs – including through contributions to international organisations such as WHO, the World Organisation for Animal Health and the Food and Agriculture Organisation – which aim to build regional disease surveillance, detection, diagnosis and reporting capacity. While these programs have been health and safety-focussed, strengthening capacities in these areas also contributes to the effective implementation of BWC objectives and obligations⁴.

V. Australian contributions to Article X implementation

10. The cooperative regional programs outlined above assist partner countries to enhance capacities to survey, detect, diagnose and combat infectious disease, and to strengthen laboratory biosafety and biosecurity measures. Through such assistance, Australia fulfils obligations under Article X and builds on the BWC's framework as a means of addressing international bioterrorism. Australia welcomes opportunities to address biological threats in the Asia-Pacific in cooperation with regional partners and the broader international community.

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⁴ Final Document of the Sixth BWC Review Conference; BWC/CONF.VI/6, Art. IV, para. 13, and Art. X paras. 53 and 55(iii)-(v).