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**Meeting of the States Parties to the Convention  
on the Prohibition of the Development,  
Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological  
(Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their  
Destruction**

5 December 2012

English only

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**2012 Meeting**

Geneva, 10–14 December 2012

Item 8 of the provisional agenda

**Standing agenda item: strengthening  
national implementation**

**Regional cooperative efforts to combat biological threats: the  
ASEAN Regional Forum workshops**

**Submitted by Australia, the Philippines and the United States of  
America**

**I. Background**

1. Cooperation at the regional or sub-regional level can play an important role in strengthening national capacities to implement the Biological Weapons Convention, exchange experiences, and collaborate. The recently completed series of ASEAN Regional Forum workshops was a highly successful demonstration of this principle and an important step in enhancing the biosecurity of the Asia-Pacific region and at the same time, further facilitating the peaceful use of the biological sciences in the region.
2. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), established in 1994, is a key forum for security dialogue amongst 26 countries and the European Union, providing a setting where participants can discuss current regional security issues and develop cooperative measures to enhance peace and security in the region. In recent years, the ASEAN Regional Forum has developed significantly to become a highly effective, solutions-oriented forum for discussing opportunities to improve regional cooperation and coordination.
3. Almost four years ago, the Republic of the Philippines took the lead, working with partner nations, in using the ASEAN Regional Forum to advance biosecurity and biosafety in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific Region, and to provide a space for discussion around areas that directly relate to the Biological Weapons Convention. Between 2009 and 2012, four workshops were developed and co-hosted by the Philippines, the United States of America and (from 2010) Australia, bringing together a diverse group of participants from across the region, including governmental officials, policymakers and subject matter experts. This gathering allowed for a multisectoral approach to addressing biological threats, bringing together stakeholders from all layers of government, nongovernmental organizations, international organizations and the private sector. The workshops were used to identify shared interests and concerns, exchange information and experiences, and make recommendations for regional cooperation and improving national capabilities to address,

prepare for and respond to biological threats. The workshops resulted in two ARF-approved “best practices” documents providing valuable guidance and support to nations in the region on specific topics; a third is in development.

## **II. 2009: Biological threat reduction**

4. In 2009, the Republic of the Philippines and the United States of America co-hosted the first ASEAN Regional Forum workshop on Biological Threat Reduction. This workshop focused on introducing the four pillars of international biological threat reduction: threat assessment; prevention; detection and surveillance; and response and recovery. There was also a presentation at this first workshop from the BWC Implementation Support Unit, emphasizing the importance of national implementation of the BWC, as well as coordination of information exchange for biological threat reduction. The BWC ISU also promoted the Interessional program, and highlighted the synergies between the areas of work in the ARF workshop and the topics being covered in the BWC Meeting of Experts. This 2009 ARF workshop laid the foundation for subsequent workshops, and led to significant progress in reducing the threats of emerging infectious disease and bioterrorism in the region.

## **III. 2010: Biorisk management**

5. In 2010, the ARF workshop focused on implementing best practices of biorisk management for the prevention of accidental release or intentional misuse of human and animal pathogens. This workshop covered topics such as methodologies for conducting biorisk assessments, strategies for biorisk management, and oversight mechanisms at the national and international levels. Participants focused on sharing technical information and national biorisk management approaches, with a view towards increasing harmonization and encouraging broad implementation of best practices in biosafety and biosecurity. This workshop produced an ARF best-practices document for implementation of a biorisk management system, including biosafety and biosecurity practices. This document was endorsed by the ARF Ministers at the 18th ASEAN Regional Forum Ministerial Meeting.

## **IV. 2011: Disease surveillance and detection**

6. The 2011 ARF workshop addressed methods of enhancing human and animal health networks to improve disease detection and surveillance. The participants took an in-depth, technical approach on (1) establishing effective disease surveillance systems; (2) implementing novel molecular diagnostic tools and strengthening lab networks; (3) integrating disease reporting systems; (4) discerning bioterrorism events from naturally occurring infectious disease outbreaks and using forensic epidemiology; and (5) implementing mechanisms and tools for international information sharing and health intelligence. This workshop produced an ARF best-practices document<sup>1</sup> that recommended core capacities for surveillance and response, as framed by the International Health Regulations (2005), strengthening regional and international outbreak reporting, leveraging health and law enforcement communities for investigating disease events, integrating human and animal surveillance, and conducting evaluations of surveillance and response. This document was later endorsed by the ARF Ministers at the 19th ASEAN Regional Forum Ministerial Meeting.

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<sup>1</sup> All ARF best practices documents are available to ARF states and conference attendees.

## **V. 2012: Preparedness and response**

7. Finally, in September 2012, the fourth ARF workshop was held to focus on enhancing dynamic strategies to strengthen human and animal health systems and infrastructure as they relate to the preparedness and response to a biological event. This workshop provided ARF members states an opportunity to share respective national efforts to strengthen preparedness and response, provide case studies for response to biological incidents, and describe ongoing efforts to strengthen preparedness and response capacity across the entire region. The workshop produced a document describing best practices<sup>1</sup> in preparedness and response, and included recommendations for strengthening biosafety and biosecurity, integrating local and national health agencies with other key stakeholders, establishing robust reporting structures, developing communications systems for public outreach, and continuing to advance full implementation of the International Health Regulations (2005), especially as these regulations apply to strengthening global alert and response systems. This best practices document will be proposed for consideration at the next meeting of the ARF Inter-Sessional Meeting on Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime.

## **VI. Discussion**

8. The ASEAN Regional Forum proved an ideal mechanism to develop robust regional partnerships to combat global biological threats arising from the nexus of terrorism, emerging and reemerging infectious diseases, and the rapid expansion of dual-use biological materials, technology, and expertise. Through the active engagement of ARF participants, these workshops have been critical to raising awareness of evolving global biorisks and the tools available to the health and security communities to reduce the risk of biological events, whether natural, accidental, or intentional in origin. The meetings also provided the catalyst for deeper collaboration essential for reducing biological threats and for further facilitating the peaceful use of the biological sciences in the Asia-Pacific region .

9. The successful conclusion of this series of workshops demonstrates the utility of the ASEAN Regional Forum as a means to encourage multilateral coordination on challenging issues that directly related to the Biological Weapons Convention and support the work of the Intersessional Process. These meetings stand as an example of how regional entities can and should come together to discuss challenges, identify solutions, and share lessons learned as a means to advance regional cooperation on biological threat reduction.

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