

**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**

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Standing agenda item: Strengthening national implementation

**Biosafety and biosecurity: today's challenges for politics and
science**

Report from a seminar held on 25 June 2015 in Vienna

Submitted by Austria

1. In the final declaration of the last (Seventh) Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention held in 2011, States Parties recognized “that achieving the objectives of the Convention will be more effectively realized through greater public awareness of its contribution.” Since then, the sustained pace of global scientific and technological development, as well as the emergence of new challenges and threats to international security, have only added to the validity of this recognition.
2. In view of this, and using the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the entry into force of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (26 March 1975), the Austrian Federal Ministries of Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs, and of Defence and Sports, together with the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, organised on 25 June 2015 in Vienna a one day seminar on biosafety and biosecurity as present day challenges for politics and science.
3. Austria wishes to bring herewith a summary of the seminar to the attention of Delegates to the 2015 Meeting of States Parties of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention. Discussions elaborated on five core issues: recent developments in the life sciences; challenges posed by transnational epidemics; bioterrorism; bioethics; and the contribution of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention to biosecurity and biosafety.
4. On recent developments in the life sciences, both synthetic biology and the research on highly pathogenic microorganisms were found to hold promise for areas such as medicine, environmental technology, or industry. As dual use research of concern, they both also pose significant risks such as the accidental release of dangerous biological material into the environment, the reintroduction of pathogens previously deemed eradicated, or criminal and terrorist misuse. There is thus scope for increasing the sense of responsibility among researchers, possibly aiming at the adoption of a code of conduct. Also, for sensitive research projects, risk-benefit analyses could be operationalised. Involving the general public more in the life sciences, thereby facilitating a qualified



discourse among society at large, would also help reduce the risk of undesirable developments.

5. On challenges posed by transnational epidemics, the increasing international mobility of persons and goods, the condensation of populations in urban centres, and climate change were identified among the factors facilitating today the spread of diseases beyond borders. Some countries face decreasing vaccination rates and lack of expertise in certain disciplines such as entomology, thereby lowering the resilience of the population and of the national health systems. In case of an acute public health threat such as the one posed by the Ebola outbreak in Western Africa in 2014, coordination of all relevant actors on national, regional and international levels is key for an effective response, as is the preparedness to mobilise quickly the necessary resources.

6. On bioterrorism it was found that biological agents, being relatively cheap and easy to obtain, are in principle attractive for terrorists. However, to this day access to the quantities and means of delivery required for large scale terrorist effect achieved with biological agents seems to remain a technological hurdle. The number of known significant incidents, therefore, is low. This though may change with scientific and technological advances. In particular, so-called agroterrorism targeting crops and livestock, rather than humans directly, is a worrying prospect. Continued attention must be paid to preventing access of terrorists to sensitive material and knowledge.

7. On bioethics, the necessity of a responsible attitude towards creation was highlighted, with a view to improving or at least preserving for future generations present conditions of life on earth. As to particular risks immanent in the ongoing advancement of the life sciences and biotechnology, a society's evaluation whether it chooses to accept those can be based on criteria such as predictability, manageability and reversibility of consequences, as well as precaution. In order to strengthen the ethical component, possible measures such as the integration of biosafety and biosecurity into university curricula, the adoption of a code of conduct for researchers, the consideration of ethical aspects in attributing research funding, normative measures and initiatives on regional and international levels were discussed.

8. Finally, the contribution of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention to biosafety and biosecurity was evaluated. The comparatively large number of States not yet adhering to the Treaty, its low degree of institutionalisation, and the lack of a legally binding verification mechanism were identified as limiting factors for the Convention's success. These shortcomings are being compensated for, to an extent, by the Convention serving as a platform for building trust and confidence among States Parties. A more active engagement of States Parties in this exercise would be desirable. The Convention has been particularly successful as centre of a network bringing into contact national authorities of the States Parties in areas such as foreign policy, defence, interior policy, health, export control and customs; international organisations such as the WHO, the FAO, and the OPCW; as well as academia, industry and civil society.

9. The seminar was successful in launching a dialogue on Austrian national level about the above mentioned issues pertaining to biosafety and biosecurity, involving representatives of various government authorities, academia, industry, media, and society at large. The event revealed considerable public interest in the problems discussed, pointing to a scope for a sustained and still broader dialogue in the future, solidifying the basis for national implementation of the Convention.

10. Austria encourages States Parties which have not yet done so to launch public awareness initiatives about biosafety and biosecurity on their national levels, and offers its national experience for consideration, if States Parties so wish.
