



Press release

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Biological and Toxins Weapons Convention 30th Anniversary of Entry into Force

26 March 2005 marks the 30th anniversary of the entry into force of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC). A landmark treaty for its time, the BTWC went further than any other arms control treaty: it bans an entire category of weapons in time of peace *and* in time of war. It was thus the world's first true comprehensive disarmament treaty.

However, in the 30 years since the entry into force the States Parties have been unable to agree on how to strengthen the convention with strong mechanisms to monitor, verify or enforce state compliance. This means that the treaty, at present, is little more than a gentleman's agreement. Yet, the threat of biological weapons use and development has not significantly diminished. While rapid developments in the field of biotechnology offer the possibility of new and more effective treatment for disease, the same developments may make the production and manipulation of biological weapons simpler and allow for the development of new types of (genetically modified) biological agents.

Like many other arms control agreements, including the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the BTWC has suffered the consequences of a shifting international security environment. No longer are states viewed as posing the only security threat in terms of weapons development and use. Rather the focus is now on terrorist groups. According to Dr Jean Pascal Zanders, Director of the Bio Weapons Prevention Project, "the focus on terrorism makes security co-operation between states more difficult than before because the threat becomes very individual for

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each state, for each citizen.” However, he argues that “the BTWC remains the single most important international norm against the development and production of biological weapons and has to be strengthened to meet the current security needs.” He added that States Parties also have the responsibility to implement the convention by adopting national legislation to make the international ban applicable to anybody on its territory. “Failure to do so creates safe havens for terrorists and criminals”, he warns.

Next year (2006) the States Parties to the BTWC will meet for the 6th Review Conference. Review Conferences take place every 5 years. In 2001 and 2002 the Review Conference failed because of disagreement over how to strengthen the treaty. The consequence was that the treaty has not been brought up to date with scientific and technological advances since the 4th Review Conference in 1996. According to Zanders, “failure to review the Convention in 2006 will mean that the BTWC is in danger of falling behind advances in the biological sciences and biotechnology. This could soon make the treaty irrelevant.”

In order to avoid the failure of the 6th Review Conference the 153 states that are party to the agreement need to consider whether they are willing to let the convention become obsolete, or whether they can find a way of overcoming the past differences to make the Convention a more effective tool for enforcing the ban on biological weapons. Zanders argues that states should consider what their security expectations are of the BTWC and what resources they are willing to invest in order to realize those expectations. “States need to decide whether multilateral arms control and disarmament agreements still have a role to play in international security, and if so, to define a long term vision for the BTWC,” he says.

The BWPP has co-organized events in Brussels, Berlin, and, today, in Geneva to mark the 30th anniversary of the entry into force of the BTWC.

Some basic facts:

- Negotiation concluded in 1971
- Opened for signature on 10 April 1972
- Entered into force on 26 March 1975

Today

- 153 States Parties
- 16 signatory states (still need to ratify)
- 25 non-signatory states