



Marienstr.19-20
10117 Berlin, Germany
Phone: +49 (0) 30-31996686
Fax: +49 (0) 30-31996689
office@inesglobal.com
www.inesglobal.com

INES statement to the Meeting of Experts to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, Geneva, August 2014

Mr. Chairman, Vice-Chairmen, Excellencies, Distinguished Representatives, Ladies and Gentlemen. We very much appreciate the opportunity to make a statement to the Meeting of Experts to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC), which I am doing on behalf of the International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility (INES).

Mr. Chairman,

We are presently half-way into the third Intersessional Process (ISP 2012-2015). The ISPs have been dealing for over a decade with specific topics of relevance to the Convention, with the aim of strengthening the BWC in specified areas. Focusing intensively on these relevant topics has been both necessary and useful. While, in our opinion, the States Parties have been able to agree on a whole array of common understandings, there has been no real, effective action in these vital areas that can strengthen the Convention substantially.

In your letter of February 2014 to the States Parties you recognized the need at this point “to start giving greater focus to the **effective action** part of our mandate”, and called on the assistance of the States Parties “in identifying which areas may be ripe for a greater focus on action, and how such action might be achieved in practical terms”.¹ The controversy over the past three years concerning the experiments aimed at making avian influenza viruses transmissible to humans should have been a wake-up call for the States Parties to the BWC to ensure prompt and concerted action towards implementing oversight programmes aimed at minimizing the potential risks associated with work in the life sciences and related fields.

Still, Mr. Chairman, this and other potentially dangerous work² continues at an ever more rapid pace with no clear perception of effective risk management systems at the national level in most countries. The potential risks involved in such work are compounded by recent reports of lapses in biosafety procedures in high-containment laboratories.³ The implementation of effective oversight systems could contribute greatly to the **prevention** of the misuse of life sciences work for non-peaceful purposes, thus strengthening the Convention. Despite repeated calls for States Parties to the BWC to communicate their activities and experiences in this area, so that best practices might be revealed, there has been little action.

¹ United Nations. 2014. Letter from the Chairman to the Permanent Representatives in Geneva of the States Parties and Signatories to the BWC. Geneva, 14 February, 2014.

² Watanabe et al. 2014. *Cell Host & Microbe* 15, 692; Bieringer et al. 2013. *PLoS ONE* 8: e57488, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0057488; Fouchier et al. 2013. *Nature* 500: 150; Sutton et al. 2014. *J. Virol.* 88: 6623.

³ Grady. D. 2014. Pathogen mishaps rise as regulators stay clear, New York Times http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/20/science/pathogen-mishaps-rise-as-labs-proliferate-with-scant-regulation.html?_r=0.

A few States Parties nevertheless have responded to these calls with the drafting of biosecurity-oriented risk management systems including detailed descriptions of procedure. We refer in particular to the oversight system of the US, which has been implemented, and the proposed oversight and awareness-raising systems of The Netherlands and Germany⁴, the latter two calling for the establishment of independent, interdisciplinary oversight bodies at the national level.

To promote more effective action on a multilateral level in this vital area, and until other systems are revealed, the States Parties to the BWC could start by analyzing these three detailed risk management programmes for best practices. The analysis would be carried out most effectively in a working group setting with the conclusions and recommendations reported back to the BWC body as a whole at the next MSP for consideration of further action. In the final report of the Meeting of States Parties in December 2013, the need was recognized for alternative ways of dealing with the ISP topics if real progress is to be made, including “An open-ended working group to consider the implications of advances in science and technology”.⁵

Mr. Chairman,

INES accordingly urges the States Parties to the BWC to follow your call “to start giving greater focus to the **effective action** part of our mandate”⁶, as we move closer to the Eighth Review Conference in 2016. A first step forward could be the analysis of risk management systems that have been formulated to date in a working group setting, with conclusions and recommendations about best practices reported to the next Meeting of States Parties for effective action to be taken.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman

INES Studies on Biological and Toxin Weapons Control
Prof. Kathryn Nixdorff, Coordinator
Department of Microbiology and Genetics
Darmstadt University of Technology
Germany
nixdorff@bio.tu-darmstadt.de

⁴ US: <https://federalregister.gov/a/2013-04127>; NL: <https://www.knaw.nl/en/topics/veiligheid/biosecurity>; Germany: <http://www.ethikrat.org/publikationen/stellungnahmen>.

⁵ United Nations. 2014. Report of the Meeting of States Parties. BWC/MSP/2013/5. Geneva, 24 December 2013.

⁶ Letter from the Chairman, February 14, 2014, op. cit.