

Biosecurity for Everyone

Statement of Pax Christi International to the BTWC Meeting of Experts

16-20 July 2012, Geneva

Mr. Chairman, Excellences,
Distinguished Representatives,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity to address you during your Meeting of Experts seeking to strengthen the norm against misuse of the life sciences for hostile purposes. Pax Christi International is a Catholic Peace Movement inspired by Catholic Social Teaching. We strongly believe that international treaties including the BTWC are valuable instruments for protecting human life and dignity anywhere in the world. We are convinced that your work should ultimately contribute to human security and respect for human rights, be it in the countryside in the Least Developed Countries or in highly industrialised cities.

We wish to make some concrete suggestions of relevance to this Meeting.

Cooperation and assistance

People anywhere in the world are bearers of basic human rights including the right to life. Not everybody has the good fortune to live in a country whose government can protect his or her life and health against dangerous pathogens, be they human-made or from natural origin. International cooperation between developed and developing countries on peaceful uses of life sciences under Article X of the BTWC should contribute to building capacities for point-of-care basic healthcare and sanitation in those countries. This is in accordance with the UN Millennium Development Goals, in particular those related to healthcare.¹ Naturally, building capacities for life science activities in developing countries should go hand in hand with strengthening the national implementation of the BTWC convention and education and awareness raising of dual use aspects among scientists and other concerned personnel. This is a dual use strategy: help developing countries to build a capability to counter outbreaks of disease, whether natural, accidental or deliberate, and at the same time help them to improve their sanitary capabilities.

Developments in the field of science and technology related to the Convention including codes of conduct and education and awareness raising

Currently, following a breakthrough in work on transmission of H5N1 avian influenza viruses² is a heated debate about scientific freedom of research and publication. Even though the scientists involved have abided by the rules of existing codes of conduct and have demonstrated clear awareness of the security implications of their work, governments are concerned about potential misuse of this knowledge by terrorists or some states. This has led to reviews of existing codes of conduct and discussion about ways to improve biosecurity policy.

¹ These include reducing child mortality and improving maternal health, and combating HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases, see www.endpoverty2015.org

² See e.g. discussion in Science:

<http://www.sciencemag.org/content/335/6067/388.summary?sid=1a629191-2127-405f-8b5b-d446a69e2de1>

Pax Christi International welcomes efforts to improve the biosecurity regime through building upon voluntary measures and raising awareness among scientists and industrialists about the dual use risks of activities in the life sciences. However, we are concerned about the securitization trend that appears to be dominant in the current debate. Citizens' biosecurity cannot be protected by restricting activities in life sciences alone. Without relentless efforts to develop new vaccines, antibiotics and basic knowledge in life sciences, more and more people will suffer from natural-borne epidemics.

Rather than focusing debate on individual projects or on what should be published, governments, the scientific community and industry should cooperate in a more comprehensive and transparent agenda for the life sciences that enables targeting sufficient resources to essential medicine for global threats to healthcare. Such an agenda could also contribute to biosecurity by design, by limiting the scope for misuse of life sciences for hostile purposes through organisational, infrastructural and technical means as much as possible. Organisational means could include education, awareness raising and biosecurity codes of conduct, infrastructural means could include measures making it easier to control access to facilities, and technical means could include use of computational chemistry and toxicological databases enabling early warning of hazardous substances.³

Strengthening national implementation

The recent discussions about the scientific breakthrough in avian influenza research suggest that even in countries where national implementation of the BTWC convention is advanced, there may be legal uncertainties. In particular, the proper balance between voluntary self-regulation (such as a biosecurity code of conduct) and legal enforceable regulation is a matter of dispute. In the view of Pax Christi International, the States Parties to the BTWC are legally accountable for protecting citizens anywhere in the world against misuse of life sciences for hostile purposes. Under no circumstance can legal implementation be replaced by voluntary ethical codes. The biosecurity codes of conduct are relevant only as an addition to legal obligations, contributing to better understanding of the law and greater awareness of dual use aspects of life sciences among scientists, students and other relevant stakeholders whether in government, academia or industry. These codes can encourage these professionals to contribute to the ultimate aim of the BTWC convention: strengthening the norm against misuse of life sciences for hostile purposes.⁴ Pax Christi International calls upon all people of good will to contribute to this, but the ultimate responsibility to protect citizens' biosecurity lies with the States Parties.

Thank you for your attention. Pax Christi International wishes you all fruitful discussions and a successful Meeting of Experts.

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³ The concept biosecurity by design has been suggested in Pax Christi International's report "Through Biosecurity to Peace", Brussels, 2011,

<http://www.paxchristi.net/international/eng/news.php?id=984&wat=show>

⁴ See for a more extensive discussion on the differences between legal and ethical responsibility chapter 6 of Malsch Ineke (2011), "Ethics and Nanotechnology; Responsible development of nanotechnology at global level in the 21st century" PhD thesis, Radboud University, www.nanoarchive.org/11110