



the sunshine project

NEWS RELEASE

www.sunshine-project.org

Last Chance for Biological Arms Control? Peace Activists Urge North-South Cooperation on Verification Protocol

(Hamburg and Austin, 19 July 2001) - What may be the final round of negotiations on a protocol to strengthen the Bioweapons Convention will start in Geneva on Monday, July 23rd. With a hard-fought compromise text on the table, all eyes are now on the US, which has repeatedly said it may back out. Without a show of strength from the rest of the world, the US may do for the Bioweapons Convention what it has already done for the ABM Treaty – pull the plug on international arms control efforts.

Global protections against biological weapons and six years of diplomatic work are at stake. Signed in 1972, the BTWC bans biological weapons; but contains no means to verify that governments are in compliance. In 1995 governments began to create a Verification Protocol to make the BTWC enforceable for the first time ever. This important process was scheduled to be complete this year. Failure would signal that major powers are no longer in agreement against biological weapons, lowering the political penalty for engaging in offensive biological weapons research and possibly signaling the beginning of the end of the global ban.

Non-profit peace groups appalled. *“The Americans regularly decry the danger of biological weapons and are pouring hundreds of millions into biodefense research.”* says the Sunshine Project’s Edward Hammond, *“If the US does another Kyoto and abandons these negotiations, it could be very destabilizing.”* The rest of the world will be forced to conclude that the US will go it alone on verifying compliance with the Bioweapons Convention. Sunshine Project attorney Susana Pimiento, who will attend the negotiations, says *“Espionage and intelligence won’t solve the biological weapons problem. That is a dangerous paradigm that could provoke belligerence and international crises. Cooperation on a strong UN verification regime can do far more than cruise missiles ever will. Political will to conclude the Verification Protocol is sorely needed.”*

Recently, an alliance of more than 100 international organizations including Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Third World Network and many others, called *“on all governments to undertake every effort to reach consensus on a strong Protocol”*, a view that was also shared by the European Parliament in a resolution it passed. But with attention focused on Star Wars and the climate negotiations in Bonn, US backsliding on bioweapons control has escaped intense public scrutiny.

Europe’s Special Role. Jan van Aken, a Sunshine Project biologist based in Hamburg, says that Europe has a critical role: *“It is now time for Europe to make it unmistakably clear to the Bush Administration that they will not tolerate a third treaty to be trashed by short-sighted American policy.”* The US argues that the Protocol is too weak and would not catch violators of the Bioweapons Convention. But the US obstructed the negotiations during the past six years and played a major role creating the watered-down compromises it now says are weakness. *“Rather than pandering to the US,”* says van Aken, *“Europe must reassume the banner of its earlier positions on key issues, work with the rest of the world to reconcile differences and make the text stronger, bringing a verification system with global support to the critical November-December Review Conference where the Protocol’s future will be decided.”*

More Details. For a detailed but concise discussion of outstanding issues in the Protocol text, please consult the briefing paper *The Biological Weapons Convention and the Negotiations for a Verification Protocol* available on our website.