

Biosafety and Biosecurity International Conference 2009 (BBIC09)

4 April 2009

Hyatt Regency Hotel, Casablanca

A significant step towards promoting healthier and more secure communities in MENA was taken by regional leaders and international experts in Casablanca this week. Recognizing the need to address the threat posed by pandemics, major biological incidents or accidents, some 100 participants from 37 countries agreed upon a plan of action for improving the region's preparedness and ability to respond.

The Biosafety and Biosecurity International Conference (BBIC09) "*Healthier and More Secure Communities in the Middle East and North African Region*" was co-hosted by the Moroccan Ministry of Education, Higher Education, Training and Scientific Research and the International Council for the Life Sciences, and was sponsored by the Environment Agency of Abu Dhabi and the Royal Scientific Society of Jordan. It built upon the work of the very successful BBIC07 Conference held in Abu Dhabi.

The conference was opened by His Excellency Omar Fassi Fehri, Permanent Secretary of the Hassan II Academy of Science and Technology and former Minister of Research, on behalf of HE Ahmed Akhchichine, Minister of Education, Higher Education, Training and Scientific Research, and by Mr. Terence Taylor, President of the International Council for the Life Sciences. HE Latifa Tricha, Secretary General of the Ministry of Higher Education, also attended the conference. The Moroccan delegation offered to host a North Africa Region Training Centre for Biosafety and Biosecurity in Rabat.

The conference was honoured with the presence of HRH Princess Sumaya bint el Hassan, in her role as President of the Royal Scientific Society of Jordan. Her Royal Highness delivered an important speech on the need to protect and promote human dignity and security. In this speech, she offered Amman as the site of the next Biosafety and Biosecurity International Conference in 2011 and as the site of a Middle East Regional Training Centre.

The experts discussed the development of biosafety and biosecurity strategies in the MENA region, the creation of biosafety and biosecurity Regional Training Centres, and the establishment of a regional biosafety association. In particular, the participants discussed practical measures for bringing about national strategies for improving health security, such as raising awareness of the issues among members of the public and policy-makers, education and training for biotechnology professionals, disease surveillance and rapid diagnostics to ensure early detection of disease outbreaks, strengthening human and infrastructure capacities to enable more effective and immediate responses to biological incidents, and coordination and networking to ensure that the views of scientists and biotechnology professionals are properly incorporated into policy-making and to ensure the rapid dissemination of best practices throughout industry and the region.

As a result of this conference, it has been agreed to:

1. Adopt the Framework Document “Developing National and Regional Biosafety and Biosecurity Strategies in the Middle East and North Africa” as the road map for the region’s efforts to develop such strategies. Certain improvements and additions were made to this document;
2. Hold a third Biosafety and Biosecurity International Conference (BBIC11) in Amman, Jordan in 2011, under the auspices of the Royal Scientific Society of Jordan;
3. Create a Steering Committee to meet regularly and to shepherd the process of building national and regional biosafety and biosecurity strategies. The composition of the Steering Committee was agreed, with the Moroccan Ministry of Education, Higher Education, Training and Scientific Research named as Chairman until 30 April 2010. Thereafter, the Chairmanship will pass to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan for the following 2 years. It was agreed that the Chairmanship of the Steering Committee should lie with the organizer of the BBIC for the year before and the year after the conference it hosts. It was agreed to hold the first meeting of the Steering Committee in Amman, Jordan in July 2009. The main purpose of this meeting will be to agree the Committee’s mandate, its work schedule, and the schedule of meetings and mandates of each of the four working groups (see below);
4. Create four working groups of experts in appropriate fields to address technical issues relating to the creation of these strategies. These working groups will address, respectively:
 - a. Human Capital Development;
 - b. Institutional, Physical and Legal Infrastructure;
 - c. National and Regional Prevention and Preparedness; and
 - d. Policy-Making;
5. Create a committee to assess the feasibility of establishing Regional Training Centres in Abu Dhabi, Jordan and Morocco with a common curriculum for training policy-makers, institution directors and safety trainers in issues of biosafety and biosecurity. It was further agreed that this committee should hold its first meeting in Amman, Jordan in July 2009;
6. Create a regional biosafety association with the mandate of enhancing the knowledge and understanding of biological safety issues throughout the region, spreading best practices amongst its members, encouraging dialogue and discussion of developing biosafety and biosecurity issues, influencing and supporting emerging legislation and standards in the areas of biological safety, biosecurity, biotechnology, transport and associated activities, and acting as a focal point for the consolidation of views on these issues.

The participants of the Casablanca Conference reiterated their strong support for continuing the Biosafety and Biosecurity International Conference process. In this regard, the Conference heard that COMSTECH will continue its technical and financial support for its future meetings and work. In addition, Professor Anwar Nasim offered to host a meeting in Pakistan to demonstrate that country’s national curricula for teaching biosafety and biosecurity at the undergraduate, graduate and master’s levels.

The representative of the World Health Organization announced a joint WHO-EU Project for the Development of Regional and National Capacity for Biological Risk Management for the Middle East and North Africa. This project will conduct regional outreach and create a one-country model demonstration of a national biological risk management strategy, to include development of national regulations and standards, preparation and implementation of a national preparedness

plan, the creation of a National Authority to include representatives of all stakeholders, a national training programme, field exercises and tests, and the creation of networks of experts.

Finally, Morocco offered to lead efforts to establish, and thereafter host, the regional biosafety association.

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