

Biowarfare's new arms race

SCIENTISTS AT A BIOTECHNOLOGY CONFERENCE in Toronto last weekend warned against the increasing production of biological weapons around the world, urging Canadians to find out about their own government's research activities in the area.

"I feel that we are now on the brink of a biological arms race," said Jan Van Aken, a German cell biologist, during a June 8 talk as part of the Biojustice/Biodiversity 2002 conference.

A 1972 convention bans the development, stockpiling and transfer of biological weapon technology, but speakers said the convention's weaknesses include a lack of verification procedures. Various countries including Russia, the U.S. and Iraq have violated its strict provisions in recent years, they explained.

A more recent international protocol on such weapons was scuttled by the U.S. last spring, but Van Aken still urged Canadians to insist their government sign on.

Van Aken is a member of an international research and advocacy organization called The Sunshine Project, which has offices in Hamburg and Seattle. The project works on uncovering information on the potential for military use of biotechnology. Its name is also inspired by the fact that many biological weapons are unstable in bright sunlight.

Van Aken encouraged Canadians to conduct research into their own government's biodefence activities. Much of the relevant material, he said, is not classified and could be uncovered with a bit of elbow grease and some freedom of information requests. "What is Canada doing?... Make this [information] available to all other countries."

He and University of California at Davis microbiology professor Mark Wheelis, another speaker at the conference, believe

the U.S. government and that country's biotechnology industry are blatantly violating the 1972 convention and domestic U.S. law regarding biological weapons.

The violations have occurred, they said, through developing non-lethal agents for use against drug crops in Colombia and Afghanistan, agents which have had dire effects on environment, health and food security. The result, suggested Van Aken, is that biowarfare taboos are rapidly falling away.

Wheelis also condemned the development of chemical weapons, which increasingly include sedatives, nervous system disruptors and mind-altering substances.

Also being developed, he said, are a class of weapons called biomaterials, bacteria capable of degrading materials like tarmac, insulation, camouflage paint, lubricants or rubber.

Under the rubric of "threat assessment," Wheelis said, the U.S. government has conducted genetic engineering of anthrax, reconstructed and tested a Soviet biowarfare cluster munition, and constructed a covert bioweapons production plant in the Nevada desert.

"The U.S. threat assessment program has done a number of things that are illegal under the biowarfare convention," Wheelis said. "The U.S. is leading the world down a very dangerous path."

The conference featured sessions on subjects from academic freedom and public health to the linked history of the pesticide industry and modern warfare to agriculture and international trade. It was timed to coincide with Toronto's staging of BIO 2002, the international biotechnology industry's annual convention.

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Information on The Sunshine Project is available at www.sunshine-project.org. Email letters@eye.net.

because street people appear a lot." Gordon Scott of the Service's 14 Division

to be... nekens received 18 months plus time served.

However, the Toronto Humane Society (THS) was informed on May

words 'Organize Murder' on it." For more information on the campaign, visit <http://www.angelfire.com/ma4/findmatt>. Email letters@eye.net.

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