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Press Release

Governments to advance work on Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety

The Hague, April 2002 – With the legally-binding Protocol on Biosafety gaining momentum towards its entry into force, delegates from over 160 governments as well as non-governmental, inter-governmental and indigenous and private sector organizations will meet here for continuing discussions from 22-26 April.

The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity aims to ensure the safe transfer, handling and use of living modified organisms that result from modern biotechnology that may have adverse effects on biological diversity, taking also into account risks to human health.

“The Cartagena Protocol recognizes that biotechnology has an immense potential for improving human welfare but that it could also pose risks to biodiversity and human health,” said Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme. "The Proposal promises to minimize these risks by establishing an effective system for managing the transboundary movement of living modified organisms."

“As of 28 February 2002, the Protocol had a total of 13 ratifications and accessions and 103 signatures. It will enter into force on the ninetieth day after the fiftieth instrument of ratification, accession, approval or acceptance, has been deposited with the Secretary General of the United Nations”, said Mr. Hamdallah Zedan, Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

“This third meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee on the Cartagena Protocol needs to make significant progress in order to ensure a smooth entry into force for the Protocol when the day arrives,” he added.

The Intergovernmental Committee for the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (ICCP) was established by the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity to prepare for the first Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Protocol (COP-MOP 1). The Committee first met from 11-15 December 2000 in Montpellier, France and then again from 1-5 October 2001 in Nairobi, Kenya. The current meeting is being held back-to-back with the sixth meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the Convention.

In The Hague, the ICCP will address the following issues: decision making; information sharing; capacity building; compliance; handling, transport, packaging and identification; liability and redress, monitoring and reporting, the Secretariat, guidance to the financial mechanism, and rules of procedure for the meeting of the Parties; and consideration of other issues necessary for effective implementation of the Protocol.

Ambassador Philemon Yang of Cameroon, Chairman of the ICCP, noted that some progress was made during the first two meetings on a number of issues. Concrete outputs so far have included: the development and implementation of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House (a mechanism for international exchange of biosafety-related information), adoption of an Action Plan for Building Capacities for the Effective Implementation of the Protocol, and establishment of a roster of over 400 experts who provide advice and other support to developing country Parties on risk assessment.

"Information sharing and capacity building, especially for developing countries, are some of the critical priority requirements for the successful implementation of the Protocol," said Ambassador Yang. "We need to empower countries to make informed decisions."

The first and the second meetings of the ICCP also prepared a number of recommendations, which will be considered by the COP-MOP.

This third meeting will also consider the report of the CBD Executive Secretary on the status of the Protocol, including the designation of National Competent Authorities and National Focal Points for the Protocol and for the Biosafety Clearing-House, as well as progress in implementing the recommendations made by ICCP 2. Reports of inter-sessional meetings convened pursuant to the previous ICCP recommendations will be discussed, namely: the regional meetings on the Biosafety Clearing-House and the Technical Experts Meetings on Handling, Transport Packaging and Identification for paragraph 2(b) and 2(c) of Article 18) and for paragraph 2(a) of Article 18.

It is expected that the meeting will prepare further recommendations that will advance preparations for the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Protocol.

Additional information

1. The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety was adopted on 29 January 2000 in Montreal, Canada, after more than three and a half years of negotiation. It will enter into force on the ninetieth day after the date of deposit of the fiftieth instrument of ratification, accession, approval or acceptance with the Secretary General of the United Nations.
2. The Intergovernmental Committee for the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety will cease to exist when the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Protocol is be held, i.e. after the Protocol has entered into force.
3. The roster of experts was established to provide advice and other support to developing country Parties to conduct risk assessment, make informed decisions, develop national human resources and promote institutional strengthening, associated with the transboundary movements of living modified organisms.
4. Additional information about the Protocol is available at : www.biodiv.org/biosafety/

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PRESS BACKGROUNDER

Biotechnology and the Biosafety Protocol

What is biotechnology? For millennia, humans have artificially altered the genetic makeup of plants and animals through breeding selection and cross-fertilization. Since the early 1970s, however, modern biotechnology has enabled scientists to transfer genetic material (DNA - the biochemical instructions governing the development of cells and organisms) through biochemical means and to radically alter the intricate genetic structure of individual living cells. They can now introduce a great diversity of genes into plants, animals, and micro-organisms almost instantly. For the first time, humanity has the power to transfer genes from one type of organism to another - for example, to insert genes from a bacterium into a tomato to create a transgenic plant. Modern biotechnology means the application of:

a. In vitro nucleic acid techniques, including recombinant deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) and direct injection of nucleic acid into cells or organelles, or

b. Fusion of cells beyond the taxonomic family,

that overcome natural physiological reproductive or recombination barriers and that are not techniques used in traditional breeding and selection.

What are Living Modified Organisms (LMOs)? LMOs are any living organism that possesses a novel combination of genetic material obtained through the use of modern biotechnology; they include a variety of food crops that have been genetically modified for greater productivity or for resistance to pests or diseases. Common examples include tomatoes, grains, cassava (a starchy root grown in Sub-Saharan Africa and other tropical areas), corn, and soybeans. Seeds for growing new crops are particularly important because they are used intentionally to propagate LMOs. **Living organism** means any biological entity capable of transferring or replicating genetic material, including sterile organisms, viruses and viroids.

What are LMO products? LMOs form the basis of a range of products and agricultural commodities. Citing the precautionary principle, some experts cite the risk that pieces of DNA remaining in these non-living products could possibly replicate under certain conditions; others consider this to be extremely unlikely. Processed products containing dead modified organisms or non-living LMO components include certain vaccines; drugs; food additives; and many processed, canned, and preserved foods. Depending on the precise definition, they can also include corn and soybean derivatives used in many foods and nonfoods, cornstarch used for cardboard and adhesives, fuel ethanol for gasoline, vitamins, vaccines and pharmaceuticals, and yeast-based foods such as beer and bread.

What are the potential benefits of biotechnology? Genetic engineering promises remarkable advances in medicine, agriculture, and other fields. It can alter the growth characteristics of micro-organisms, insects, fish, and animals or make them produce new substances. It can improve the resistance of plants to pests and environmental pressures and increase their commercial value. It can create food crops with increased yields, raising the protein generated from limited land and resources. It can also make plants more resistant to disease and insects. Other benefits include new medical treatments and vaccines, new industrial products, and improved fibres and fuels.

What are the potential risks? Biotechnology is a very new field, and much about the interaction of LMOs with various ecosystems is not yet known. The introduction of genetically modified organisms should not proceed faster than advances in scientific understanding. Some of the concerns about the new technologies include unintended changes in the competitiveness, virulence, or other characteristics of the target species; the possibility of adverse impacts on non-target species (such as beneficial insects) and ecosystems; the potential for weediness in genetically modified crops (a plant becomes too resistant and invasive, perhaps by transferring its genes to wild relatives); and the stability of inserted genes (the possibilities that a gene will lose its effectiveness or will be re-transferred to another host). A specific example that has recently been cited involves the insertion of protease inhibitor genes (PIs) into plants; these small proteins interfere with enzymes in the intestinal tracts of insects and can disrupt development and destroy larvae in both pests and beneficial insects. Similarly, Bt-toxins engineered into a wide range of transgenic plants may build up in the soil and harm pollinators and other beneficial insects.

What is biosafety? Biosafety is a new term used to describe efforts to reduce and eliminate the potential risks resulting from biotechnology and its products. It is based on the precautionary principle, which states that the lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as an excuse to postpone action when there is a threat of serious or irreversible damage. While developed countries that are at the center of the global biotechnology industry have established domestic biosafety regimes, many developing countries are only now starting to establish their own national systems.

Why is biotechnology also a trade issue? The commercialization of biotechnology has spawned multi-billion-dollar industries for foodstuffs and pharmaceuticals that continue to grow at a dramatic pace. Under World Trade Organization (WTO) regulations, the regulation of trade must be based on "sound scientific knowledge". Under environmental regimes, the agreed standard of proof is the precautionary principle. The WTO also does not accept socio-economic concerns, such as the risk that exports of genetically engineered crops may replace traditional ones and undermine local cultures and traditions in importing countries. The subsidiary agreements of the WTO, including the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement (SPS), Technical Barriers to Trade Agreement (TBT), and the Agreement on Trade-Related Intellectual Property (TRIPs), also contain specific provisions that apply to the biosafety issue.

Why is an international Biosafety agreement needed? The objectives of the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity are "the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources." There is growing public concern about the potential risks posed by living modified organisms. A particular concern is that many developing countries lack the technical, financial, and institutional means to address biosafety. They need greater capacity for assessing and managing risks, establishing adequate information systems, and developing expert human resources in biotechnology. While many countries with modern biotechnology industries do have domestic legislation, there are no binding international agreements covering LMOs that cross national borders because of trade or accidental releases. An international regime is needed now while the biotechnology industry is still young and major errors have not yet been committed.