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RESPONSIBILITIES FOR BIOLOGICAL PEACE

At a time when many sensible people are raising questions about how to bring peace to the world, certain international activities have gone almost unnoticed by the public and especially by biomedical scientists. These activities deserve more attention and support.

On 28 September 1971 delegates to the 25-nation Geneva Disarmament Conference passed a draft Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction. The United Nations General Assembly adopted this Convention on 16 December by a vote of 110 to 0, with 1 abstention. It will be ready for ratification by various countries beginning in February. This action by the United Nations may be one of the first cases in history where so many political delegates agreed to destroy an existing weapons system, which had been produced and stockpiled in several countries. The implementation of the Convention, however, will become the responsibility of the parties to it.

To implement and adhere to the various articles in the treaty will require not only action by governments but also the work and moral accountability on the part of scientists, especially microbiologists, in all countries. Actions should be taken by the proper parties to assure that these responsibilities are assumed.

Each of the 15 articles in the Convention serves a purpose, but 2 are of special significance for scientists; they are in part:

ARTICLE X. "The States Parties to the Convention undertake to facilitate, and have a right to participate in the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials, and scientific and technological information for the use of bacteriological (biological) agents and toxins for peaceful purposes. Parties to the Convention

in a position to do so shall also cooperate in contributing individually or together with other States or international organizations to the further development and application of scientific discoveries in the field of bacteriology (biology) for prevention of disease or for other peaceful purposes."

ARTICLE XII. "Five years after the entry into force of this Convention . . . a conference of States Parties to the Convention shall be held . . . to review the operation of this Convention, with the view to assuring that the purposes . . . are being realized."

One might assume that if Article XII is to serve any meaningful purpose in 5 years, that Article X must be implemented in some manner during the period.

The initiative taken by the United States in destroying its stockpiles of microbial weapons and in converting its facilities at Fort Detrick and Pine Bluff was an admirable example for implementing the Treaty. But there is also a challenging responsibility to microbiologists that deserves financial and other types of support by governments ratifying the treaty.

Logical scientific organizations that should cooperate in these important tasks are: (i) certain existing committees within the agencies of the United Nations family, (ii) the International Union of Biological Sciences, (iii) the International Association of Microbiological Societies and its national members such as the American Society for Microbiology, and (iv) other national organizations in various countries as the American Biology Council. If biologists wish to demonstrate their willingness to cooperate and to assume some leadership in the search for peace, they should accept the challenge put forth in the Convention and direct their efforts toward "microbes for peace." Scientists have only begun to discover the valuable and useful secrets of the microbial world.

J. R. Porter