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Remarks at the 7th Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention Review Conference

Remarks

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Secretary of State

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Thank you, Mr. President. And I would also like to express my appreciation to all of the delegates and to my colleague, Minister Rosenthal, for his comments. I want to thank the Implementation Support Unit for all the efforts to advance the work here.

I want to start by acknowledging that our countries have accomplished a great deal together under the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention. One hundred sixty-five states have now committed not to pursue these weapons, and I am delighted to welcome Burundi and Mozambique to the Convention, and I join in urging all states who have not yet done so to join.

President Obama has made it a top goal of his Administration to halt the spread of weapons of mass destruction, because we view the risk of a bioweapons attack as both a serious national security challenge and a foreign policy priority. In an age when people and diseases cross borders with growing ease, bioweapons are a transnational threat, and therefore we must protect against them with transnational action.

The nature of the problem is evolving. The advances in science and technology make it possible to both prevent and cure more diseases, but also easier for states and non-state actors to develop biological weapons. A crude, but effective, terrorist weapon can be made by using a small sample of any number of widely available pathogens, inexpensive equipment, and college-level chemistry and biology. Even as it becomes easier to develop these weapons, it remains extremely difficult – as you know – to detect them, because almost any biological research can serve dual purposes. The same equipment and technical knowledge used for legitimate research to save lives can also be used to manufacture deadly diseases.

So of course, we must continue our work to prevent states from acquiring biological weapons. And one of the unsung successes of the Convention is that it has engrained a norm among states against biological weapons. Even countries that have never joined the Convention no longer claim that acquiring such weapons is a legitimate goal. But unfortunately, the ability of terrorists and other non-state actors to develop and use these weapons is growing. And therefore, this must be a renewed focus of our efforts during the next 14 days, as well as the months and years ahead.

Now, I know there are some in the international community who have their doubts about the odds of a mass biological attack or major outbreak. They point out that we have not seen either so far, and conclude the risk must be low. But that is not the conclusion of the United States, because there are warning signs, and they are too serious to ignore.

Terrorist groups have made it known they would want to acquire and use these weapons. And in the 1990s, the apocalyptic cult, Aum Shinrikyo unleashed two attacks in Tokyo by spraying a liquid containing anthrax spores into the air and unleashing sarin gas into the subway. In 2001, we found evidence in Afghanistan that al-Qaida was seeking the ability to conduct bioweapons attacks. And less than a year ago, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula made a call to arms for – and I quote – “brothers with degrees in microbiology or chemistry to develop a weapon of mass destruction.”

We all have an interest in ramping up our efforts to prevent outbreaks and attacks and then to be prepared to respond if they do occur. The 2001 anthrax attacks in the United States killed five people and sickened 17. More than 10,000 were required to go on to antibiotics. A mass outbreak could cripple an already fragile global economy by cutting off the movement of people, goods, and sparking food shortages. And of course, a victim of an attack could just as easily travel from one country to another.

So shoring up our domestic and international defenses will make it easier to detect and respond. We need public health systems that can quickly diagnose outbreaks, whatever their source, and mobilize the right medical resources and personnel. By making any one country more secure, we make the international community more secure at the same time.

Two years ago, the Obama Administration released our national strategy for countering biological threats, which is a whole-of-government approach designed to protect the American people and improve our global capacity. We support our partners' efforts to meet new international standards in disease preparedness, detection, and response. We are helping make laboratories safer and more secure, engaging 44 countries in these efforts this year. And since 2007, we've conducted more than a dozen workshops to help train public health and law enforcement officials.

But there is still more to do, and I want to briefly mention three areas. First, we need to bolster international confidence that all countries are living up to our obligations under the Convention.

It is not possible, in our opinion, to create a verification regime that will achieve this goal. But we must take other steps. To begin with, we should revise the Convention's annual reporting systems to ensure that each party is answering the right questions, such as what we are each all doing to guard against the misuse of biological materials.

Countries should also take their own measures to demonstrate transparency. Under our new Bio-Transparency and Openness Initiative, we will host an international forum on health and security to exchange views on biological threats and discuss the evolution of U.S. bioresearch programs. We will underscore that commitment by inviting a few state parties to the Convention to tour a U.S. biodefense facility next year, as Ambassador van den IJssel and the UN 1540 Committee did this past summer. And we will promote dialogue through exchanges among scientists from the United States and elsewhere. In short, we are intending and our meeting our obligation to the full letter and spirit of the treaty, and we wish to work with other nations to do so as well.

Second, we must strengthen each country's ability to detect and respond to outbreaks and improve international coordination. As President Obama said earlier this year at the UN, "We must come together to prevent and detect and fight every kind of biological danger, whether it's a pandemic like H1N1, or a terrorist threat, or a terrible disease." Five years ago, 194 countries came together at the World Health Organization and committed to build our core capacities by June 2012, and we should redouble our efforts to meet that goal. We will support the WHO in this area, and I urge others to join us.

Finally, we need thoughtful international dialogue about the ways to maximize the benefits of scientific research and minimize the risks. For example, the emerging gene synthesis industry is making genetic material widely available. This obviously has many benefits for research, but it could also potentially be used to assemble the components of a deadly organism. So how do we balance the need for scientific freedom and innovation with the necessity of guarding against such risks?

There is no easy answer, but it begins with open conversations among governments, the scientific community, and other stakeholders, in this forum and elsewhere. We have recently had our U.S. President's Commission on Bioethics develop ethical principles that could be helpful in this dialogue, and we urge a discussion about them. Ambassador Kennedy and the U.S. team look forward to working with all of you for a strong set of recommendations.

And let me conclude by saying we know the biological threats we face today are new, but our commitment to face threats together is not. More than 85 years ago, after the horrors of World War I, the international community took a stand against the use of poison gases and bacteriological weapons. And nearly a half-century later, that shared commitment brought us together to adopt the Biological Weapons Convention. So in that same spirit, let us move forward to address the challenges we face together in the 21st century. Thank you very much.