

UNITED STATES MISSION

TO THE UNITED NATIONS AND OTHER
INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN GENEVA

U.S. Statement at the Annual Meeting of States Parties of the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention



Statement delivered by:

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for your efforts on our behalf. Your leadership and the capable assistance of the BWC Implementation Support Unit, will form the basis for a successful conclusion of our efforts this week. The United States Delegation is prepared to fully support your efforts.

Mr. Chairman, colleagues, it is a pleasure to be with you today as we work to promote common understanding and effective action in the areas of assistance and coordination in the event of alleged use of biological or toxin weapons. This important effort is at the heart of what is sometimes called the "health-security interface." Parties to the BWC have committed to assist one another in the event of a biological weapons attack.

This commitment is complemented by the commitments under the World Health Organization's International Health Regulations to collaborate in the detection, assessment of, and response to public health emergencies of international concern, because a biological weapons attack may not always be immediately recognized as a deliberate event. Similarly, the provisions of BWC Article X reinforce those of IHR Article 44, which calls for collaboration in the development, strengthening, and maintenance of required public health capacities.

There has been debate about whether this forum should be engaged in discussions of capacity-building for disease surveillance and response. The U.S. believes that these simple truths – that biological weapons attacks are not always readily identified as attacks, and that effective detection and response to an attack are only possible if there is an effective public health response – make it abundantly clear that this is our business.

We should not seek to replace the WHO or the World Organization for Animal Health, but we do need to ensure that their efforts are supported, and that they are integrated seamlessly into a larger response framework that includes the scientific, law enforcement and national security communities. The exchanges that occurred during the Meeting of Experts in August showed that collaboration among the key international organizations, among governments, and across sectors within national governments is strong and growing.

The intersessional meetings of the past two years were important opportunities for experts from around the world to discuss the components of comprehensive disease surveillance, impediments to implementing efficient and effective systems, and lessons and recommendations that can help build capacity around the world that is vital for public health and invaluable in the event that a biological weapon is used. The exchanges of ideas and information and the partnerships formed as a result of these meetings have resulted in real action to tackle these problems in many States Parties.

Our task this week is to reinforce these trends. I hope our report will welcome these collaborations; that it will highlight the potential value of the “One Health” approach to disease surveillance; that it will emphasize the importance of cooperation between public health and law enforcement, and among relevant international organizations; and that it will draw particular attention to the need to build capacity in advance of a potential biological weapons attack. We should call on States Parties to work to identify and resolve legal and other barriers to prompt, effective international cooperation.

We hope also to welcome the efforts made by individual States Parties and the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs to ensure that the UN Secretary-General’s Mechanism would be able to respond effectively if called upon to investigate an allegation of BW use, and to encourage further work in this area.

Mr. Chairman, last December, Under Secretary of State Ellen Tauscher addressed this body, and described President Obama’s new National Strategy for Countering Biological Threats. I would like to report on the results of some of the plans and commitments she outlined:

- Under Secretary Tauscher pledged that the United States would work toward posting future CBM submissions on the public access side of the BWC website. Our 2010 CBM submission is publicly available. We did this without compromising our high standard of transparency: the United States submission remains the most extensive of all national submissions. We urge others to

consider making their submissions public as well. We would be happy to consult with any interested State Party about the steps we took to do this and the issues we encountered.

- As announced last December, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have established the first WHO Collaborating Center for IHR implementation. CDC's global health resources support at least one core IHR capacity area in over 90 countries through a network of laboratories, surveillance systems, training programs, and support for pandemic preparedness.
- Under Secretary Tauscher also announced our plans to host two international workshops on disease surveillance and IHR implementation and the relationship to the BWC. Those conferences were held with wide international participation, and demonstrated again the usefulness of bringing the security and public health communities together to address areas of common concern. The proceedings of these meetings are available here, and accessible on-line through the website of the journal BMC Public Health. The U.S. also recently hosted an international workshop on International Perspectives on Mitigating Laboratory Biorisk in Istanbul, as well as a regional biosecurity workshop through the ASEAN Regional Forum.

These efforts were inspired, in part, by the constructive conferences organized jointly by the Governments of Norway and Indonesia in 2008 and 2009, and by the Geneva Forum's series of workshops on Confidence-Building Measures. We believe that such efforts are an important way to support and reinforce the work we do here in the formal intersessional meetings, and part of a broader, more networked approach to implementing and supporting the Biological Weapons Convention.

Mr. Chairman, colleagues, state development and possession of biological weapons, which drove the negotiation of the BWC nearly forty years ago, still represents a challenge today. However, the nature of the biological risk is far more complex than it was in 1975. Advances in the life sciences have expanded both states' ability to covertly pursue a broader range of biological weapons and sub-national actors' capability for serious BW attacks.

At the same time, the risk of severe, rapidly spreading natural outbreaks of infectious disease has increased due to expanded travel across national borders. These increased risks have triggered intensive efforts to prevent and respond to large-scale outbreaks of infectious disease of natural or deliberate origin.

The BWC is sufficiently broad and flexible to address this full spectrum of biological risks; we should work together to do so. At the Seventh Review Conference, we should consolidate and build on our efforts since 2006, and focus BWC efforts on concrete actions to reduce the threat of disease misused as a weapon and address the full spectrum of 21st Century biological risks.

Ambassador van den Ijssel of the Netherlands recently described his vision of a successful RevCon as one that marries “consensus and ambition”: either one, without the other, is inadequate. We agree. We need a realistic but ambitious approach that will garner wide support and also allow us to make real progress in strengthening implementation of the Convention.

Strengthening requires addressing the right issues, including enhancing efforts to strengthen national implementation and measures to counter the threat of bioterrorism, as well as efforts to increase confidence in States Parties’ compliance with their Article I obligations. The United States remains convinced that a verification regime is no more feasible than it was in 2001, and perhaps even less so, given the evolution of technology and industry.

However, we believe that there are pragmatic and constructive things that can be done to promote transparency and to strengthen mechanisms for consultation and clarification. This would be a constructive area to explore during the next intersessional period. We also need to stay abreast of developments in science and technology. And we need to build capacity and practical arrangements at the health-security interface: this is a critical area of common concern, and one of the most vivid examples we have of Article X in action on a daily basis.

Having raised the issue of Article X, let me affirm that the United States is deeply committed to implementing the Biological Weapons Convention in its entirety, and that includes Article X. We do a great deal to facilitate the international exchange of equipment, materials, and scientific and technological information for peaceful purposes, and to support the further development and application of scientific discoveries in the life sciences for peaceful purposes. Article X is being vigorously implemented through many different channels and activities around the world. There is value in exploring ways to build awareness of the cooperation that is taking place, and to objectively identify needs that should be addressed.

A “consensus and ambition” approach also means getting the process right. The United States believes that we need a strengthened, revitalized intersessional process that builds on the success of the past four years. Such a process would have the following characteristics:

- Greater flexibility to address sets of related issues, and to return to specific issues to solve problems instead of delaying resolution for a future intersessional process, including through the establishment of standing working groups to deal with specific issues.
- Greater authority for the Annual Meetings of States Parties to establish their agendas and adopt decisions. This is an area where we need to proceed thoughtfully. Not every issue we discuss in this forum lends itself to a collective decision. In some cases, consultation and exchange among experts is more productive than any text we could negotiate. This exchange has been the best

part of the existing intersessional process, and we should take care not to lose it. But where there is the need for a common approach and the opportunity to reach agreement, we should not be precluded from doing so by our own procedures.

- Appropriate institutional arrangements: We need to give careful thought to what we are seeking to achieve, and arrange our method of work accordingly. Similarly, we will need to agree on how we would like the ISU to support our efforts, and structure any modest expansion in staffing or changes in mandate based on those requirements. The question of developments in science and technology also arises here: a number of States Parties have called for the development of a mechanism to ensure that we remain abreast of and respond appropriately to developments in science and technology. This is a reasonable goal. But it seems to us important that we first consider what needs such a mechanism would fulfill, and then design a mechanism that successfully addresses those needs.

Mr. Chairman, the United States believes that States Parties agree on far more than they disagree concerning the next Review Conference and the intersessional process to follow. However, reaching our shared vision for the future requires a great deal of work. To achieve the goal of an ambitious, consensus outcome, we will need to create opportunities to consult between now and next December; we will need to share our ideas early, and listen carefully to the ideas of others; we will need to build as much common ground as we can, and then find ways to record that agreement. The United States is committed to this goal, and prepared to work with others to do the hard work required.

Colleagues, thank you for your attention. We look forward to working with you not only this week, but in the months ahead.