Preparing for the Eighth Review Conference of the Biological Weapons Convention

Regional Workshop for South and Southeast Asia

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

At the outset I would be remiss if I did not say thanks and Namaste to our Indian hosts. This trip is special for me not only professionally as the first regional workshop that I attend before the BWC Review Conference, but also personally. New Delhi was my second posting as a Korean diplomat, much younger than now and it is such a great pleasure to return here after 24 years. I am overwhelmed to witness the sea change taking place in between, including a traffic jam this morning.

I also want to thank the European Union for its continued support, not just on the Biological Weapons Convention, but on the entire disarmament and non-proliferation agenda. The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs has forged a strong partnership with the EU, including in pursuit of our shared goal of a world free of weapons of mass destruction.

This year marks the tenth anniversary of EU support for the Biological Weapons Convention, (BWC). Over these years, the EU has contributed over EUR 6 million to BWC implementation around the world.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

The BWC, along with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Chemical Weapons Convention, is a load-bearing pillar of the multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation regime. Since it entered into force over 40 years ago, it has made a genuine contribution to international peace and security.

It was the first treaty to prohibit an entire category of weapons. It has also established a universal norm against the possession and use of biological weapons. It reflects, in the words of the Convention’s preamble, that the use of biological weapons is “repugnant to the conscience of mankind.”

As Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, “the norm against the use and possession of biological weapons remains strong, no country identifies itself as a ‘biological weapons state’.”

However, as we move into what has been described as “the century of biology” the pressure is on to make sure the BWC remains relevant and robust, including to grapple with revolutionary developments in science and technology, and to deal with the increasingly real possibility of a biological attack.
The Asia-Pacific is rapidly becoming the global economic hub. It is home to the majority of the world’s population. A biological attack in any State of this region would go beyond that country and the region.

This morning, I am going to speak first about the BWC’s current status and then about some of the emerging challenges to the Convention.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

First, the current status of the BWC.

From the development of confidence-building measures to the creation of the Implementation Support Unit (ISU), led by Daniel Feakes as its Head, the BWC’s review process has made considerable progress in strengthening the Convention.

The current intersessional process has been constructive and has led to common understandings in relation to cooperation and assistance, national implementation and science and technology.

I hope the Review Conference in November will take decisions turning these common understandings into effective action for the future. Proposals to bolster the process and to create an open-ended working group to strengthen the Convention are illustrations of States parties’ deep commitment to keeping the BWC fit for purpose.

Last week in the Security Council, the Secretary-General said “Disarmament and non-proliferation instruments are only as successful as Member States’ capacity to implement them.”

In the case of the BWC, it is worrying that annual submissions of CBMs have yet to pass 50 per cent per year. We are concerned about reports that States are having difficulty implementing their national obligations. National implementation of the Convention is ever more important as States Parties are faced with the challenges posed by non-state actors.

States parties should use the Review Conference to further consider how to ensure complete implementation of all of the Convention’s obligations. The ISU, of course, is at your disposal to do its best to help match donor States with those in need. The ISU also needs the support of the States Parties as its staff strength is really minimal. We appreciate the EU’s support to fill the gap.

Universality is a central component of any successful disarmament instrument. With 175 States parties, the BWC has solid membership. But we must push the Convention over the final hump and obtain the accession of the more than twenty States who remain outside its ambit.
The recent momentum towards universalisation, demonstrated by Andorra, Angola, Cote d’Ivoire and Mauritania joining the Convention, is encouraging. From the Asia-Pacific, I am especially pleased to see Nepal participating in this workshop and to hear that good progress is being made on its ratification process.

The Review Conference could usefully consider additional steps that could be taken to help non-State parties build the capacity to accede.

In this context, States parties in the Asia-Pacific can encourage the eight remaining regional states to commence the ratification process prior to the Review Conference. In particular, regional States should give consideration as to how they can assist the four non-State parties in the South Pacific.

The need for a fully funded BWC is obvious. The BWC represents remarkable value for money. I am therefore disappointed that a number of State parties do not pay their assessed contributions in full or on time.

I appreciate that global financial constraints must be taken into account, but considering that over half of States parties pay US$1,000 or less per annum, with the lowest being US$19, there should be no excuse for anything other than prompt payment.

Finally, I cannot ignore the subject of verification. I appreciate there are long-standing divergent views on this matter, but States parties could initiate a dialogue with a view to finding flexible and innovative ways forward. Confidence-building measures provide transparency, but they are no substitute for verification.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

Now I will move to the second point – the emerging issues affecting the Convention.

The BWC has a long history of grappling with trends in science and technology. Its review conferences are explicitly mandated to take such developments into account.

However, the world is experiencing a revolution in bio-technology, possibly unlike any seen before. Synthetic biology, CRISPR, and genome editing will change the way we live our lives.

Combined with developments in other fields, these emerging technologies have the potential to bring huge benefits to the entire international community.

From the BWC perspective, new advances in defensive and protective measures, verification and attribution technologies, and monitoring capabilities, all have the potential to reinforce the Convention.
In the case of biology, new technology has significantly lowered technological and cost barriers. This will bring the benefits of these new advances to all regions of the world. How the BWC, as a fine example of ‘science diplomacy’, can facilitate the application of these advances for sustainable development could be discussed at the Review Conference.

This is consistent with both Article X of the Convention and the Sustainable Development Goals, which encourage cooperation on science, technology and innovation, and enhanced knowledge-sharing. To strengthen the implementation of Article X, States parties could look to examples of technology and knowledge sharing from other fields of international cooperation, such as the “technology mechanism” under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Unfortunately, the possibility that these technologies could also be misused cannot be ignored. This is not an issue for the BWC alone – it is a concern across the entire disarmament and non-proliferation agenda. New advances in information technology, artificial intelligence, unmanned vehicles and 3D printing, could significantly multiply the effects of chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear devices.

To ensure the benefits of advances in biology, while protecting against their misuse, I expect States parties to further consider this issue at the Review Conference.

Particular attention should be paid to the benefits of the role of education as a prevention tool. Awareness of the ethical and societal implications of new technologies is vital for their safe and beneficial use. The Review Conference could, perhaps, also give further consideration to possible codes of conduct among the scientific community, as well as to enhanced interaction between the BWC and the Secretary-General’s Scientific Advisory Board.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

A fully implemented, universal and up-to-date BWC is crucial to preventing a biological attack. However, we also need to think harder about the consequences if our best efforts at prevention were to fail. This is my last point.

Recent outbreaks of Ebola, MERS and Yellow Fever have all demonstrated how quickly a disease or pathogen can spread and cause carnage. Serious gaps were exposed in the international community’s ability to respond. We need to ask ourselves what could have happened if any of these had been a deliberate release, designed to cause maximum infection.

Ours is a world of increasingly porous borders. Non-state actors are actively seeking all kinds of WMD. Chemical weapons are once again being used. Technology has radically reduced barriers. A biological attack is a risk we have to prioritise.
The consequences and impact of a biological attack on civilian population would be far greater than that of a radiological or chemical attack. But the investment made for the international architecture on these three types of WMD is the reverse of the possible impact.

Any attack would almost certainly become a complex international health and humanitarian emergency, disrupting law and order. But the coordination and capabilities required to respond – across the national, regional and global levels – are unclear and untested.

If the attack is beyond the remit of the concerned international agency or the capacity of the attacked country, the international community will likely turn to the United Nations. This was the case with the recent Ebola response.

We have made some progress in developing investigative mechanisms, including the Secretary-General’s Mechanism as highlighted by Ambassador Bylica, but any international response will go beyond an investigation. The international community needs to think hard about what to do in advance of such an eventuality.

Under Article VII of the BWC, States parties have an obligation to provide assistance in the case of a biological weapons attack. I hope that the Review Conference can build on the intersessional discussions about strengthening Article VII to produce concrete additional steps. This could include how to coordinate with the United Nations and other intergovernmental organizations.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

To counter the growing threat and risk of a biological attack, we need a robust, adaptable and comprehensive Biological Weapons Convention that is able to meet the needs of all States parties.

The forthcoming Review Conference is an opportunity to take positive steps in that direction. I hope States parties here today will lead the way and show the necessary flexibility and spirit of compromise required to produce a successful outcome.

I wish you all the best for a fruitful workshop.

Thank you.