8th Review Conference of the Biological Weapons Convention

remarks by

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His Excellency, Ambassador György Molnár, President of the Review Conference

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen

At the outset, let me thank States parties for the opportunity for me to speak today. As the oldest treaty prohibiting an entire category of weapons of mass destruction, the Biological Weapons Convention has a special place in the global disarmament regime. The long-standing norm against the use of biological weapons, codified by the Convention, makes a fundamental contribution to the security of humanity.

I must thank the President of the Review Conference, Ambassador Molnár again, for his excellent preparatory work done this year. I am especially grateful for his active involvement in several regional workshops which were organised by States Parties, the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs and the Implementation Support Unit.

The norm against biological weapons is deeply rooted in the universal recognition that the use of disease as a weapon would be "repugnant to the conscience of mankind" [quote]. Indeed no country openly admits today to the possession of biological weapons.

Since the last Review Conference in 2011, however, new trends have emerged and amplified the need for a strong prevention and response framework.

The risks and threats of an attack using biological material are rising. The taboo against chemical weapons has been repeatedly broken in the Middle East. This should remind us that the taboo against biological weapons could also be broken one day. In recent years there have been repeated warnings from the international scientific community that developments in science and technology, such as gene-editing, as well as the broad dissemination of knowledge enabled by information and communication technology, have lowered the technological barriers to acquiring and using biological weapons.

The West Africa Ebola outbreak clearly demonstrated the humanitarian and health consequences that a biological pathogen can unleash. A deliberate release designed to cause maximum infection could be much worse than a chemical weapons attack. Yet there is no commensurate institutional structure or mechanism to prevent or respond to such an eventuality. We have repeatedly warned our Member States that despite a much higher risk, the institutional investment in this area is lower than that in nuclear, chemical or radiological response mechanisms.

The growing risks and threats of a biological incident demand a successful conclusion to this Review Conference.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I recognize States parties’ intersessional efforts to strengthen the BWC. These meetings have focused on practical issues and have contributed to a much wider awareness and
understanding of the BWC. They have also brought in many more relevant stakeholders. However, I want to highlight four gaps for your attention.

First, a “universality gap”: while a majority of States have joined the BWC, 177 so far, there are still 19 States that have not yet done so. This is much higher than the number of States still to join the Chemical Weapons Convention or the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. All States parties should therefore step up their efforts to promote a universal BWC, especially within their own regions. Four recent ratifications are the result of such combined efforts. Our particular thanks should go to Nepal for expediting the ratification since the regional workshop held in India only a couple of months ago.

Second, an “implementation gap”: the BWC requires implementation at the national level. Although there is a lack of data, the findings of the Security Council resolution 1540 comprehensive review and the low rate of submissions of BWC Confidence-Building Measures suggest that implementation is not where it should be. There is also a lack of concrete activities to promote peaceful uses of biology as compared to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons or the International Atomic Energy Agency. But there are possible models from technology facilitation mechanisms in other fora that could also inform the implementation of the BWC.

Third, a “response gap”: while some useful work has been done over the past few years in relation to Article VII of the BWC, it is still not clear how or through what mechanisms States Parties would react and respond to a case of biological attack.

We have no institution or coordination mechanism to protect us. States parties could build on the useful intersessional conversations to define how they would respond to any attack, including coordination between States, with international organisations including the UN and the World Health Organization, and between health and security sectors. The Ebola response showed the importance of international coordination and how much still needs to be done.

Finally, each of these issues is underpinned by what I would call an “institutional gap”. Compared to the other major disarmament measures, the BWC is a skeleton operation. Its meetings, especially those enabled to take decisions, are infrequent and its minimal institutional support structure consistently asked to do more. Are two weeks of meetings per year sufficient to address the issues raised above? Is a three-person Implementation Support Unit adequate to meet the emerging trends and growing expectations of States Parties? Is the financing methodology of the BWC adequate, especially in light of the financial crisis all disarmament conventions are currently facing?

This Review Conference is an opportunity for States Parties to explore new ways to address and close these gaps. The Implementation Support Unit and the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, including its Regional Centres for Peace and Disarmament, stand ready to work with you for this purpose.
Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is clear that there is strong and widespread support for the BWC. Many developing countries have growing expectations of the BWC. The BWC is the only global and inclusive forum in which all these issues can be discussed and concrete decisions taken by consensus. I therefore count on you to be bold in rising to the challenge.

A relevant, responsive and robust BWC requires processes and people to match. Indeed, we are using all the means available to implement and strengthen the norms set by the BWC. Security Council resolution 1540 and the Secretary-General’s Mechanism are important tools to complement the BWC. States parties should think deeply about whether, in today’s fast moving security environment, the current structures are sufficient, tenable and strong enough.

I hope this Conference will take the necessary decisions to lead the way over the next five years in pursuit of a world safer and more secure for all. Since 1980, successive Review Conferences have built on past achievements, but we still have a long way to go. The international community cannot afford to continue to lag behind the pace of technological advances and the growing security risks. We must not allow the gaps to widen. We must find a way to summon the collective will of States Parties to keep pace. Failure to do so would put our cherished Convention at serious risk. As Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon emphasized in his video message, we must ensure that the BWC remains fit for purpose and responsive to the needs of all its States Parties. This conference is the opportunity to accomplish these crucial tasks. I wish you all fruitful deliberations over the next three weeks.

Mr. President, please bear with me in raising one more issue for your urgent attention. This issue is not directly related to the BWC Review Conference but is connected as a common issue facing all disarmament treaty bodies. The Review Conference of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, due to be held next month is still facing a shortage of funds. It threatens the convening of the Review Conference as planned.

I hope that the same political commitment and goodwill shown for the Anti-Personnel Landmines Convention Conference shall also prevail in this case.

Unfortunately, the financial window is closing within a week to decide whether the CCW Conference can proceed or not. Together with the Chair, Pakistan, we appeal once again to States participating in the CCW Review Conference to pay their outstanding dues and assessed contributions by this week. A table showing the status of contributions shall be made available today. In case any delegation wants to update on its financial status, we are happy to engage. The postponement of the CCW Review Conference would send the wrong signal to the international community. That should be avoided at all costs. We count on your support.

Thank you.