

Opening Statement for the BioWeapons Prevention Project Launch

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It is an honour to address you at the launch of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) -- a new initiative by like-minded non-governmental organizations aimed at strengthening the norm against using disease as a weapon. Of course all your organizations that are lending their name and support to this initiative are "old hands" in supporting the process of disarmament and it therefore augurs well that you have decided to pull your efforts together for such an important objective.

The activities of the project will include monitoring implementation by Governments of their legal and political obligations related to biological weapons, as well as other developments, publishing findings to increase openness and transparency, and building a global network of civil society organizations concerned with the threat of biological weapons. This is a very timely and significant initiative.

As we all know, the Biological Weapons Convention, unlike the Chemical Weapons Convention, does not contain provisions on the implementation of the Convention or on the establishment of an implementing organization. Despite political changes and the fast-paced scientific and technological advancements in the field of biotechnology since the Convention

entered into force, efforts to rectify such a shortfall have not met with the support of all States Parties to the Convention. Last year, the international community witnessed (with frustration) lost opportunities to strengthen the BWC.

The lack of a mechanism to monitor the implementation of the BWC provisions other than the possibility to review the Convention at five-year intervals, is a lacuna that today more than ever must be addressed. The launching of the BioWeapons Prevention Project could make a significant contribution towards that end since, achieving the objectives of the BWC -- the prohibition of the development, production and stockpiling of bacteriological (biological) weapons and their elimination -- cannot be done solely by the actions of Governments, as indispensably it requires the committed participation of civil society.

The threat of use of biological weapons or bio-terrorism derives from the ease of access to biological agents and technology, as well as from the blurred border between peaceful and offensive uses of biotechnology. This threat has become even more real and imminent in view of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the anthrax incidents in the United States last year. Thus, it is essential that the credibility of the BWC and other related international treaties as functioning disarmament regimes be preserved.

Monitoring the measures taken by Governments in dealing with dual-use biological capabilities and bio-security and in implementing legal and political obligations under the BWC and other related treaties, and scrutinizing other developments related to biological weapons and the biotechnology industry, as proposed by the BWPP, can make a substantial contribution to achieving the consistent observance of the international norm against biological weapons.

As I have reiterated on numerous occasions, NGOs and civil society are an indispensable part of international disarmament efforts. They have played various roles in this respect, complementing the work of Governments, being engaged in advocacy on disarmament issues, educating the public and working in partnership with Governments and intergovernmental organizations. The dedicated work by NGOs in the area of anti-personnel mines is an excellent example of how Governments and NGOs can work together towards achieving a disarmament goal. NGOs have also successfully established systems to monitor the ban on landmines and the spread of small arms, thereby contributing in a meaningful way to enhancing confidence between Governments and civil society.

The goal of disarmament and arms control is to achieve human security that comprises public safety and social stability. The disarmament process should be susceptible to measurement, for society must be able to gauge the extent to which it is achieving its disarmament goal. It is also important for the public to be able to assess how well its leaders are implementing obligations under international treaties, as well as national laws and policies aimed at ensuring that those commitments are respected. Eliminating the threat of biological weapons and bio-terrorism is part of such efforts.

The basic challenge in advancing the goal of disarmament is to ensure that members of global, multilateral disarmament regimes are accountable for fulfilling their obligations under the treaties that created such regimes. As regards the BWC, currently the only exercise on transparency measures carried out within its framework is the voluntary annual information exchange on confidence-building measures (CBMs), as agreed at the Second Review Conference and amended at the Third Review Conference. Participation in that exercise and the information provided therein are however not satisfactory, as has been recognized by the States Parties to the BWC. Furthermore, information on unilateral measures taken by States Parties to implement their legal and political obligations under the BWC is often not generally available. In this context, BWPP's objective of increasing openness and transparency on issues relating to the Biological Weapons Convention and other international treaties that codify the norm against biological weapons will certainly play a positive role in strengthening the Convention.

It is also encouraging to see that this new endeavour will establish a global network of civil society organizations working not only in the area of disarmament and arms control, but also in related fields such as biosciences and technology, health and the environment. By increasing the level of general awareness of biological weapons issues and generating new expertise in this area in countries around the world, as it is proposed, such a network could actually be tapped by interested Governments for the expertise that it will have at hand.

In the preamble to the Biological Weapons Convention, States Parties determined, for the sake of all mankind, to exclude completely the possibility of biological toxins and agents being used as weapons and to spare no effort to minimize that risk. Today more than ever this remains a daunting task that can only be accomplished if all stakeholders in this process are given the opportunity to make a contribution. Partnership is the key word.

It is therefore very timely that you have decided to launch the BioWeapons Prevention Project on the first day of the resumed session of the Fifth Review Conference of the BWC. States Parties participating in the resumed session have a challenge before them of showing their commitment to strengthening the Convention by producing a positive outcome. NGOs, such as the BioWeapons Prevention Project, have a stake in this outcome and, even more so, in the follow-up to the Review Conference.

I wish therefore to express my appreciation and best wishes for your initiative. The United Nations Department of Disarmament Affairs looks forward to cooperating with the BWPP in our shared commitment to strengthening the international norm against the offensive use of biotechnology.