

Remarks by the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Mr. Sergio Duarte, at the launch of the Biological Weapons Convention Implementation Support Unit

Geneva, 20 August 2007

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be able to join you in Geneva so soon after my appointment as High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, and am especially pleased to be present at the launch of the Implementation Support Unit of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). Today we will inaugurate a new level of cooperation between the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs and the States Parties to the BWC. Together, we are taking a sensible, modest, but long-overdue step forward in addressing what some have called the “institutional deficit” of the BWC.

The outcome of the Sixth Review Conference has been justifiably heralded as a success in restoring a sense of common purpose and unity among the States Parties, after several years of disappointments and diminishing expectations. The result is a living treaty – the focus of a dynamic ongoing process involving both States Parties and civil society. The agreement on intersessional work over the period 2007-2010 is one important part of this consensus, as was the decision to establish the Implementation Support Unit. It appears that multilateral disarmament is once again moving forward in this difficult field.

What accounts for this success? I believe it was due to two key factors:

- recognition by the States Parties that the threat posed by biological weapons was both real and rapidly evolving, and a worthy subject for a fully multilateral response; and
- the determination, persistence, creativity and hard work by the States Parties and their supporters in civil society, especially during the preparations for the 6th Review Conference and at the Conference itself.

Where this recent progress in multilateral cooperation will lead is impossible to predict. It may inspire confidence in additional collective efforts to protect against this global threat. It may lead to additional mandates or an expansion of the institutional resources available to States Parties to pursue their collective ends. It may even, through the power of example, encourage States Parties of other multilateral treaties to deepen their own cooperation in meeting other challenges to international peace and security. While we cannot know what the future will hold, the whole world has now seen the practical face of multilateralism, and the concrete benefits it offers to all members of international society.

I am pleased that the States Parties have pragmatically decided that their Implementation Support Unit should be established within the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs. This is a natural partnership – after all, the first resolution adopted by the General Assembly in 1946 called for the elimination of all weapons adaptable to mass destruction, so it is surely fitting that the States Parties to the BWC would work with the United Nations in achieving their common aims. This is also an expression of trust. On this point I would like to assure the States Parties that the Office for Disarmament Affairs will offer every support to the ISU to enable it to fulfil its mandate effectively.

I hope that States Parties, too, will support the Unit. It is a resource you have established to support your efforts to implement the Convention. Much of the mandate of the Unit is concerned with facilitating communication among States Parties and, upon request, facilitating contacts with scientific and academic institutions, as well as non-governmental organizations. The Unit will also serve as a central clearinghouse for information relating to confidence-building measures. Clearly, the more States Parties make use of such services, the better they will work. On your behalf, we have recruited three highly competent and experienced staff for the ISU: I strongly encourage all States Parties to make the fullest possible use of their expertise and resources.

As biological weapons threats continue to evolve, so too must the States Parties confront the need to enlist new allies, develop networks, and adapt our strategies. In fulfilling its mandates, the ISU will help with this, but it is only part of the solution. Governments, international organisations, scientific and professional societies, commercial industry, academics and NGOs all have a role to play. Later this week, for example, we will have a presentation on a significant initiative -- backed by Member States and entrusted to the United Nations -- to establish a bio-incident database. We must all continue to work against biological weapons threats with energy and determination.

Let me conclude by offering my congratulations to the States Parties on their achievement, my encouragement to the staff of the ISU, and my very best wishes to all.