

**Fourth Session of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction**

**New York, 13-17 November 2023**

**General Debate Statement: Implementation Support Unit of the Biological Weapons Convention**

**Presented by Daniel Feakes, Chief of the Implementation Support Unit of the Biological Weapons Convention**

Mr. President,

On behalf of the Implementation Support Unit of the Biological Weapons Convention, I am pleased to address this Fourth Session of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction. The BWC Implementation Support Unit addressed the previous sessions of the Conference and is pleased to do so again this year.

Let me start by joining others in wishing you, Mr. President, with the support of the Office for Disarmament Affairs, every success in the work ahead of you.

Mr. President, distinguished delegates,

The Biological Weapons Convention was the first international treaty outlawing an entire category of weapons of mass destruction. The Convention, along with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, is one of the key components of the international disarmament architecture to address the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The Convention entered into force more than 45 years ago, in 1975. With the accession to the Convention of South Sudan on 15 February this year, the Convention now has 185 States Parties. Twelve States have become parties to the Biological Weapons Convention in recent years and over 93 per cent of the world is now bound by its terms.

Eighteen Members to this Conference are already party to the BWC. In addition, three have signed but not ratified the Convention (Egypt, Somalia and the Syrian Arab Republic) and three have neither signed nor ratified the Convention (Comoros, Djibouti and Israel).

The steady progress towards full universalization is a significant achievement for a treaty of its age and demonstrates its continuing relevance. It is well understood that universal adherence to the Convention is needed to strengthen the global norm against the use of biological agents and toxins as weapons.

Mr. President, distinguished delegates,

I will keep my statement brief and I would direct Members to the Conference to our background document which provides more detailed information and has been issued as document A/CONF.236/2023/BD.1/Rev.1 dated 1 November 2023. I would therefore like to highlight some key developments in the rest of my statement.

The Ninth BWC Review Conference took place in Geneva in November and December last year, just two weeks before the Third Session of this Conference. The Review Conference was a major milestone in the evolution of the Convention and it was able, despite the difficult geopolitical environment, to take important and substantive decisions by consensus. Twenty Members to this Conference were present at the Review Conference.

The centrepiece of the agreement reached at the Review Conference was the establishment of a new Working Group on the Strengthening of the Convention, open to all States parties. The aim of

the Working Group is to identify, examine and develop specific and effective measures, including possible legally binding measures, and to make recommendations for strengthening and institutionalizing the Convention in all its aspects, to be submitted to States parties for consideration and any further action. The measures should be formulated and designed such that their implementation supports international cooperation, scientific research and economic and technological development, avoiding any negative impacts.

The Working Group, which will meet for 15 days each year from 2023 until 2026, will address seven specific topics, including “measures on compliance and verification”, and it will also make recommendations on the establishment of mechanisms to facilitate and support the full implementation of international cooperation and assistance under Article X and to review and assess scientific and technological developments relevant to the Convention and to provide States parties with relevant advice.

The Review Conference urged the Working Group to complete its work as soon as possible, preferably before the end of 2025. At the completion of its work, the Working Group will adopt a consensus report that includes conclusions and recommendations according to its mandate. The adopted report will be submitted for consideration at the tenth Review Conference scheduled for 2027, or earlier at a special conference. The Working Group has already held two sessions this year, and will meet for its third session in Geneva in a few weeks’ time.

Mr. President, distinguished delegates,

The BWC is an important forum for cooperation in meeting international security obligations. Biological weapons can be used to attack not only humans, but also livestock and crops. These weapons can kill and incapacitate both civilians and military personnel and can also have devastating economic and environmental effects. All States are potentially at risk from such weapons and all can therefore benefit from becoming parties to the Convention.

Compared with other weapons of mass destruction, biological weapons are relatively easy to develop, transfer and conceal. Moreover, rapid developments in science and technology are creating a variety of environmental, ethical, political and social risks and challenges.

The struggle against biological weapons must, therefore, like the diseases involved, cross geographical boundaries and requires interdisciplinary expertise from the security, scientific, public health and agricultural sectors, as well as the private sector and civil society. The Convention provides a useful framework to bring such a diverse range of actors and expertise together.

There is a growing risk that biological weapons may be obtained and used by non-State actors, including terrorist groups. Wider adherence to the Convention will ensure that there are fewer places where bioterrorists can work with impunity. Becoming a party to the Convention is a step all States can take to help reduce the threat of bioterrorism.

This need is made more urgent by recent developments in science and technology. While their universal benefits are unprecedented, such developments can also create risks of misuse for which we are not sufficiently prepared. Thus, it is important that advances in biological science and related applications must continue to be carefully monitored within the framework of the Convention, along with related convergent technologies. It is therefore encouraging that the new Working Group has been mandated to make recommendations on the establishment of a advisory mechanism for science and technology.

It is vital that the diplomatic and scientific communities work together to tackle our common challenges, particularly to ensure that security concerns do not hamper beneficial scientific advances and their application for the good of humanity. Thus, we need to deepen our efforts to maintain and further build strong relations and partnerships with the scientific and technological community. Scientists have always been instrumental for sound and forward-looking arms control and disarmament.

Mr. President, distinguished delegates,

Article X of the Convention requires States parties to facilitate and have the right to participate in the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information for the use of biological agents and toxins for peaceful purposes. Bilateral or regional assistance and cooperation may be available under the Convention that is not available through other channels, or not available to non-parties.

In terms of training and capacity-building in the Middle East, a regional workshop on scientific and technological developments related to the Convention took place in Jordan in 2018. In recent years, capacity-building assistance has been provided upon request to Iraq, Lebanon, the State of Palestine and Sudan. A regional training course for national contact points for the Convention from the Middle East and North Africa is scheduled for January 2024. All of these activities have been supported by the European Union.

Furthermore, several activities have been undertaken involving Members to the Conference located in Africa. A regional workshop on the universalization and effective implementation of the Convention in Eastern Africa took place in Mombasa, Kenya in October 2022, in which four Members to the Conference participated. Morocco hosted a regional workshop on the universalization and effective implementation of the Convention in Northern Africa in June 2023, in which five Members to the Conference participated. Several national capacity-building activities are planned to be carried out by 2026 upon request from States Parties across Africa. These activities are supported by several members of the Global Partnership against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction.

The Implementation Support Unit also provides administrative support and advice on all aspects of accession, ratification and implementation. The financial costs involved in becoming a party to the BWC, which is funded entirely by extra-budgetary resources, are minimal starting at only 20 US dollars per year.

Further details on implementation aspects of the Convention, including on participation in official meetings by States from the region and the submission of Confidence-Building Measures can be found in the background document prepared by the BWC Implementation Support Unit, which has been submitted to this Fourth Session of the Conference.

The Convention's 50th anniversary in 2025 is an ideal milestone to target universal adherence to the Convention and the Implementation Support Unit looks forward to continuing to work with Members to the Conference towards that goal.

I thank you for your attention.