

Opening Statement by the President of the Sixth Review Conference of the Biological Weapons Convention, Ambassador Masood Khan (Pakistan)

Geneva, 20 November 2006

Mr. Secretary-General, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to thank the States Parties for electing me as the President of this review conference of the Biological Weapons Convention. Let my first act as President be to warmly welcome to our conference, on behalf of all the States Parties, the United Nations Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan.

Today is a special day and a momentous occasion. This conference is the launching pad for our campaign against biological warfare. This conference is where we confront the threat of biological weapons, and where we must discharge our responsibility to ensure that disease is never used as a weapon.

Thirty-one years ago, the original signatories to the BWC decided that biological weapons would never be produced or used. They resolved that biological agents and toxins would be used only for peaceful purposes.

Today, 155 States Parties can look back with satisfaction and say that this Convention has been an effective barrier against the use of disease as a weapon. Stockpiles have been destroyed, the incidence of biological weapons has been low, and no country - State Party or not - would dare contend that biological weapons can ever have a legitimate place in national defence.

But there is no room for complacency. Biological weapons are a real, potent threat to humanity, not a figment of the imagination. They are weapons of mass destruction that may be as deadly as nuclear weapons, and even deadlier.

And the threat is growing. We face the disturbing prospect of terrorists acquiring and using biological weapons. The rapid advances in the life sciences mean it has never been easier or cheaper to develop them. New bioweapons will be more virulent, easier to hide, and harder to combat.

The extraordinary breakthroughs in the biosciences promise better medicines, better crops, and a better environment. But the perfectly legitimate development of new vaccines, or treatments for Alzheimer's and diabetes, has also revealed a more sinister potential for malign use. The challenge will only become greater, with synthetic biology witnessing exponential growth, and biotechnology finding widespread commercial applications around the world.

We need a range of measures to meet these challenges. But no attempt should be made to smother scientific inquiry or to restrict the growth of the biotechnology industry. Our sole purpose should be to ensure that the peaceful applications of science and technology can develop in safety.

This conference is a vital opportunity to take action against a threat which is too serious to ignore. Thanks to the energy, resourcefulness and commitment of the States Parties over the past months, the time is ripe for success.

At this review conference, we will look at the implementation of each article of the Convention, build on the work of the past four years, and take decisions on strategy and activities beyond 2006.

We must produce a concise and accessible outcome document that records our understandings and commitments in a way that communicates them clearly to a broad audience.

We should recapture and reaffirm the norms and core elements of the Convention, and previous understandings reached by States Parties, including on scientific and technological developments and on prohibition of the *use* of biological weapons. We should step up our efforts to universalize the treaty, and aim to secure universal adherence by 2011.

We will need to deal with a number of specific topics passed to us by the Fifth Review Conference, and decide on any further action. We will also have to address the various fresh proposals made by States Parties, on such matters as bioterrorism; national implementation; confidence-building measures; biosafety and biosecurity; scientific and technological cooperation and exchange; compliance and verification; coordination with other organisations; and institutional support arrangements.

And perhaps most importantly, we must develop a full calendar of work for the period until the next review conference, so that our efforts to confront the threat of biological weapons do not cease at the close of the conference.

The fight against biological weapons must be a shared effort. We should seek coherence among national mechanisms, confidence-building among States Parties, and synergy between international organizations. Scientists and civil society are playing a valuable role, and interest in the BWC among the private sector is increasing. This conference is an important chance for "networking" with other organizations, and coordinating the collective efforts of the international community against biological weapons. Coordination with the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture and the World Organization for Animal Health – all working to respond to natural disease or accidental releases – should be reinforced. All those fighting terrorism – including Interpol and the Security Council Resolution 1540 Committee – should further refine their bioweapon-specific activities.

For several years, a state of paralysis has endured in the areas of disarmament and non-proliferation. The world leaders who met in New York in September 2005 failed to say anything on these issues in their outcome document. The Secretary-General called this silence "shameful". But now we have a chance to break the pattern. Last week, Ambassador Francois Rivasseau of France led the CCW review conference to a successful conclusion. This is a good omen. We have an opportunity now to change the culture of despondency into collective action for a common cause.

We want synergies rather than trade-offs: we should look not for the lowest common denominator, but for creative solutions that link to the common aspirations underlying the differing priorities of States Parties. We all want to stop biological weapons. We all want to ensure that the peaceful applications of the life sciences can safely and securely reach their full potential. We must seek measures that will help us achieve these common goals. I am confident that with creativity and determination, we will succeed.
