

# ARMS CONTROL ASSOCIATION

Statement by the *Arms Control Association* to the Sixth Review Conference of the States Parties to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention

## **Time for collective action to tackle the threat of biological weapons**

At a time when multilateral arms control is in deep crisis, the Sixth Review Conference faces the important challenge of agreeing on concrete actions to help prevent the deliberate use of disease as a weapon of war and terror.

During the ten years since the last full review of the BWC, the prohibition of biological weapons has come under increasing pressure from several directions. The growing threat of bioterrorism, the rapid developments in the biosciences that could be misused for hostile purposes, and the growth of opaque biodefense programs have all undermined trust in the effectiveness of the Convention.

Unfortunately, collective efforts to respond to these challenges have been lacking. National measures, which have been the focus of recent efforts to strengthen the norm against biological warfare, are important. But they are not sufficient to counter the new threats to the BWC.

Vitally needed are uniform and binding guidelines to manage dual-use technologies, closing loopholes that could be exploited by those seeking to use biotechnology for hostile purposes. Transparency must be increased on the basis of universal rules, so that trust in the compliance of all relevant actors is increased. And the universal rules must be legally binding on states-parties, so that those countries in breach of their obligations can be singled out.

No state is capable of tackling these challenges to the BWC alone.

The intersessional process that many of you have been involved in over the past three years proved useful by increasing the number of stakeholders in the BWC and creating a greater sense of ownership. Important issues were discussed and states parties were reminded of their responsibility to implement fully the provisions of the Convention.

From the outset, however, the new process was hampered by an artificially limited agenda and a narrow mandate that precluded joint action. A new series of intersessional meetings prior to the Seventh Review Conference should be empowered to address all issues of importance to the Convention and to take decisions binding on all states-parties. Five more years of discussions without decisions will do little to strengthen the BWC.

The *Arms Control Association* believes that states parties can and should agree on a number of collective measures to strengthen the Convention. Decisions on these topics should be taken at this Review Conference wherever possible, or during meetings of states-parties prior to the next conference if consensus cannot be reached in the coming three weeks.



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What collective measures should be addressed? First, more transparency is needed for activities that could be misconstrued as being violations of the BWC. Biodefense programs, for example, often lack sufficient public or international scrutiny. Improved Confidence-Building Measures can be one way to improve openness and expose countries that have something to hide.

Second, five years after the collapse of the Ad Hoc Group negotiations, it is time to establish a new dialogue among scientific and political experts on the verifiability of the Convention. A fresh look at ways to monitor compliance could pave the way for the eventual resumption of talks on a BWC verification mechanism.

Third, the Convention lacks instruments to follow-up compliance concerns. A universal and legally-binding compliance protocol would be the best approach to address this gap. But while waiting for a protocol, BWC member states should strengthen the instruments available today. Preserving UNMOVIC's core competencies in the biological sector and revitalizing the United Nations Secretary-General's mechanism for investigating the alleged use of biological weapons are two concrete measures that can be taken by states-parties at this meeting.

Fourth, the lack of common standards for ensuring the physical security of dangerous pathogens risks creating a patchwork quilt of inconsistent national regulations, containing gaps that bioterrorists could exploit as targets of opportunity. Establishing universal biosafety and biosecurity standards is worthwhile and achievable goal.

Fifth, this Review Conference should state clearly that all new types of biological weapons are prohibited, including so-called "non-lethal" biochemical weapons that are under development in the United States and have already been used by Russia.

Last but not least, strong institutional support for the Convention can facilitate discussions on these issues, improve the exchange of information among states-parties, and help to implement follow-up actions. Establishing a permanent institutional support unit for the Convention that serves as a focal point and a clearing-house for information is a long-overdue step that should be taken at this meeting.

The Sixth Review Conference must do more than simply avoid failure. States parties have offered a lengthy menu of constructive proposals for collective action, both here in Geneva and over the next five years.

It is to be hoped that the new middle ground that has emerged among states-parties from all regional groups during the preparations for this Review Conference will open the way to a number of concrete accomplishments during the next three weeks. The *Arms Control Association* wishes you much success in achieving a successful outcome.

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*The statement was written by Oliver Meier and Jonathan Tucker  
on behalf of the Arms Control Association.*