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Strengthen Biosecurity Now!

Statement of Pax Christi International for the Sixth Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention 20 November – 8 December 2006, Geneva.

Mr President, Excellencies, Distinguished Representatives, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. It is strongly recommended that the States Parties to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) decide this year to adopt a Final Declaration that builds upon the successful annual Meetings of States Parties in 2003, 2004 and 2005, and further strengthens the regime totally prohibiting biological weapons. The dizzying progress of the life sciences, with the accompanying potential threat of bioterrorism, as well as the possibility of misusing peaceful biodefence or civil pharmaceutical industry activities to cause harm to humans, animals or plants, makes this step only more urgent. Simply focussing on the matter of universality and national implementation of the treaty, while important, is not enough. The WMD commission led by Hans Blix concluded: "It is crucially important for the BTWC states parties to use the Sixth Review Conference ... to reassert the Convention's role as the central component of the overall regime and agree on concrete measures to implement it."¹ Further steps to strengthen the regime cannot be postponed another five years until the Seventh Review Conference. As others have suggested, there is a compelling argument for a dedicated standing secretariat to nurture and sustain the regime prohibiting biological weapons. The BTWC is a fully multilateral treaty, binding 155 sovereign states, and it needs institutions to match. Whilst there is a need for action to adopt national legislation to counter the continuing threat posed by biological and toxin weapons whether by state or substate actors, it has to be appreciated that the action plan on national implementation of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) adopted by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has required significant resources from the Technical Secretariat and comparable resources are currently not available for the States Parties to the BTWC.

2. Pax Christi International is concerned that many of the States Parties to the BTWC are insufficiently aware of the potential that current trends in the life sciences and the commercialisation of results in this area have for undermining the Convention. The importance of the requirement in Article XII for consideration of the impact of "any new scientific and technological developments relevant to the Convention" is stressed. All over the world there is a convergence of activities in biotechnology, nanotechnology, information technology and cognitive sciences. Questions that need to be addressed include the following: Are the prohibitions of the BTWC sufficiently broad to ensure that advances in these converging fields are not misused? Also, why is there no apparent connection between the work on strengthening

¹ WMDC final report: "Weapons of Terror: Freeing the World of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Arms", New York, 1 June 2006.

the norm against bioweapons and the emerging discussions on ethical, legal and social aspects of so-called military nanotechnology?

3. Are we certain that all laboratories whether in academia, industry or government storing potentially hazardous materials are known, secure and listed? There is a trend towards “tweaking genes in the basement” of the private home of entrepreneurial scientists.² States Parties are legally responsible for all activities carried out within the State, including those taking place in campus-based life science spin-off companies. Currently, “open innovation” is the norm, involving a fuzzy network of universities, large companies and numerous small companies, most of them run by PhD students hoping to commercialise the successful outcomes of their projects, and sell them to large industries. Are the current regulations and inspection bodies sufficient to control and monitor all that is happening in such a loose network? Seminars carried out by Dando and Rappert in the last two years in the UK, US, Finland, Germany, Netherlands and South Africa have shown that there is little awareness of the BTWC amongst those engaged in the life sciences. It is evident that the States Parties need to take concrete steps now for education, outreach and codes of conduct.

4. Even if a national government is closely monitoring activities in the life sciences including work to counter outbreaks of disease both natural and deliberate in its own country, how can other countries or even individual citizens of these countries, be assured that their government is not undertaking any prohibited activities? In such a situation, transparency about national activities in the life sciences is vital.

5. States Parties should show its commitment to strengthening the norm against biological weapons immediately, by installing an interim supportive structure with the capacity to match the requirements of the Convention. States Parties must take steps to enable the safe development of life sciences and other converging technologies in the interest of humanity.

Pax Christi, the International Catholic peace movement, has 95 member organisations active worldwide and has a Special Consultative Status with the United Nations.

Brussels, 21 November 2006

² See: <http://www.wired.com/news/technology/medtech/0,71276-0.html?tw=rss.index>