Statement to the UN General Assembly First Committee
on Disarmament and International Security
New York
12 October 2016
Delivered by Kathryn Millett
on behalf of the Global Civil Society Coalition for the Biological Weapons Convention

Mr. Chair,

Disease, especially deliberate disease, poses a major risk to international security, whether directed at humans, animals, or plants. Public health emergencies connected to Ebola and Zika virus have illustrated how far we have to go before we are sufficiently prepared to overcome challenges in global health security. The human, economic, social and political costs of natural, accidental, and deliberate disease can be immense: the World Bank estimated $7 billion USD was spent on fighting Ebola, which ultimately infected approximately 28,000 people and caused 11,000 deaths. It is clear that disease can decimate countries, derail development, stigmatize thousands, and cause longer-term health issues. The effects of Ebola will undeniably be with us for decades.

If we are struggling to deal with natural disease, the possibility that such incidents might be accidentally or deliberately instigated is a pressing concern for the international community. Indeed, in February this year the World Economic Forum named biological weapons as one of the top three technologies that will negatively transform warfare. International efforts are yet to find an effective way to balance the benefits of modern biotechnology against their potential for misuse.

This year, the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) - a cornerstone of international humanitarian law and the first disarmament treaty to ban an entire class of weapons – will undertake its Eighth Review Conference. The BWC is the lynchpin of global efforts to ensure that disease or toxins are never used as a weapon. During the conference, States Parties will assess the status of the convention and should agree on effective means to better improve the fight against the use of these universally condemned and abhorrent weapons.

To date, the Convention has given us much to celebrate. The accession of Angola in July this year brings global membership to almost 90%, with a total of 175 States Parties. No state has used biological weapons since its entry into force in 1975; no country openly possesses biological weapons; and no state views them as a legitimate national security tool. The norm against the development and use of these weapons remains strong and continues to grow with each new State Party.

There remain, however, serious challenges to this norm and to the treaty, and we can neither afford to be complacent nor fail to make full use of the opportunity presented by the Eighth Review Conference to ensure that the Biological Weapons Convention meets the needs and challenges of the modern world.

First, it is crucial to recognize that the threat posed by the malign use of the life sciences has evolved since the last Review Conference in 2011. The international scientific community has repeatedly warned that developments in science and technology have lowered every technological barrier to acquiring and using biological weapons. In addition, biotechnology know-how and equipment diffuse ever more widely – a trend set to continue and expand dramatically in the coming years as the bio-economy grows. The BWC must be capable of keeping abreast of new developments, advances and applications in life sciences. It must also respond to them appropriately and effectively, minimizing risks through effective action and by taking advantage of their benefits in pursuit of the treaty’s objectives. This is an issue with which States Parties should be familiar - there have been ad hoc
discussions on instituting a regular science and technology review process since the last Review
Conference. It is now time for action. We believe that the Review Conference must establish a process
for more systematic advice for BWC States Parties on science and technology and, further, that this
process should be transparent and as inclusive as possible with an active role played by non-
governmental bodies including industry and academia.

Second, there is a pressing need for States to ensure that the interval between Review Conferences
is used more effectively and productively. The intersessional process has become stagnant with
fewer gains each year and increasing numbers of States are frustrated at being unable to take
decisions or pursue effective action. We believe a useful way forward would be to restructure this
process by replacing the annual BWC Meeting of Experts with specific Working Groups or processes
on key issues and so focus States Parties’ efforts on the most pressing areas. We have further
outlined some options in an additional paper available outside the room and online at
http://www.bwpp.org/documents.html. Regardless of how States decide to reshape the
intersessional work programme, the Review Conference must seize this opportunity to restructure
the process in a way that allows the treaty to adapt to effectively address contemporary health
security issues. Simply maintaining the ineffective status quo is unacceptable and may signal the
start of a slide into irrelevance for the BWC.

Third, States Parties must reexamine and improve how they deal with compliance with the
Convention. With no verification system, the BWC relies on a raft of disparate and ineffective
compliance tools. States should start afresh on this issue. States Parties should establish a process to
explore the efficacy of the different approaches already tabled and trialed by some of their number.
States Parties should explore how they can demonstrate their compliance to one another within an
acceptable framework of accountability, using agreed procedures to clarify and resolve any
compliance concerns, in as transparent a manner as possible.

Fourth, we believe that more resources are needed to support work that is necessary to fulfill the
Convention’s objectives, undertaken both by the treaty’s Implementation Support Unit (ISU) and by
supporting partners. There will be nominal costs in establishing a science and technology review
process and revising the intersessional work programme. States should not shy away from meeting
these incremental costs which would significantly enhance the effectiveness of the regime and which
would constitute a far smaller sum than the international community already invests in mitigating the
threats posed by other weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, the treaty’s Implementation
Support Unit struggles to accomplish its remit on existing resources. Establishing new processes will
increase this burden further. The ISU should be provided with adequate human, financial, and
administrative resources necessary to successfully meet its mandate. In addition, States Parties have
recognized the valuable contributions made by related international, regional, and non-governmental
organizations in giving effect to the biological weapons ban. States Parties should continue to find
ways to ensure that such necessary efforts are sufficiently funded into the future.

Mr. Chair,

The Biological Weapons Convention is not only a vital component of the global disarmament
framework, but also of broader global health security efforts and international humanitarian law.
Failure at the Eighth Review Conference to enable the BWC to adapt and thus retain its relevancy in
an ever-evolving age will impact humanity’s ability to prevent and mitigate disease events that kill and
maim on an ongoing basis. The cost of a treaty that is not fit for purpose is one that will not be borne
by diplomats in Geneva or New York but by our communities, societies, and families around the world.

Thank you.
This statement has been endorsed by:

Abt Associates, USA
American Biological Safety Association (ABSA International), USA
Biosecure Ltd, UK
Black Emergency Managers Association, USA
BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP)
Cranfield University, UK: Stephen Johnson
Disarmament Dynamics, UK
EcoHealth Alliance, USA: William B. Karesh
Elizabeth R Griffin Research Foundation, USA
Elizabeth R Griffin Research Foundation, USA: James M. Welch
George Mason University, Schar School of Policy and Government, Biodefense Graduate Program, USA: Gregory Koblentz
Green Cross International, USA
Global Emerging Pathogens Treatment Consortium (GET), Sierra Leone
Hamburg University, Research Group for Biological Arms Control, Germany
Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Center for Communicable Disease Dynamics, USA: Marc Lipsitch
Harvard-Sussex Program, UK: Cailtriona McLeish
Harvard-Sussex Program, UK: James Revill
Harvard University, USA: Ara Tahmassian
Independent Researcher, Germany: Kai Ilchmann
Independent Researcher, USA: Meagan Derringer
International Federation of Biosafety Associations (IFBA)
International Healing House, USA: Eleanor Pomeroy
International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility: Kathryn Nixdorff
International Office for Innovation in Reducing Crime, UK: Guy Collyer
Landau Network – Fondazione Volta, Italy
Louisiana State University, College of the Coast & Environment, Department of Environmental Science, USA: Martin Hugh-Jones
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Future of Life Institute
North Carolina State University, Department of Political Science, USA: Kathleen Vogel
Pro-Med, USA: Jack Woodall
Scientists Working Group on Biological and Chemical Security, Center for Arms Control and Non-proliferation
Human Security for Latin American & the Caribbean (SEHLAC) Network
Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict, India: Animesh Roul
Stanford University, Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), USA: Megan J. Palmer
The Trench, France: Jean Pascal Zanders
Toxic Remnants of War Project, UK