



## **Strengthen the Ban on Biological Weapons**

### **Statement of Pax Christi International to the Eighth Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention**

**7-25 November 2016, Geneva**

Chairman, Excellencies, Distinguished Representatives, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity to address you during the Eighth Review Conference of the BTWC. We wish to make some concrete considerations of direct relevance to this Conference.

First of all, we would like to thank the Chairman for his clear and comprehensive summary report of the main issues discussed during this year's Preparatory Committee meetings to facilitate preparations for this Review Conference. This report includes a wealth of valuable and ambitious contributions to strengthening the international norm against misuse of life sciences for hostile purposes.

We welcome this promising progress in your deliberations, as we are concerned that action needs to be taken now – at this Review Conference – to protect the biosecurity of citizens all over the world. We note especially that in his disconcerting address to the Security Council open debate on the Non-Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction on 23 August 2016, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon said: *“I am extremely concerned that the international community is not adequately prepared to prevent or respond to a biological attack. The impact and consequences of a biological attack on a civilian target could far exceed those of a chemical or radiological attack. But investment in the international architecture dealing with these different types of WMD is not commensurate with their possible effects. For example, there is no multilateral prevention and verification agency for biological weapons, as there is for nuclear and chemical threats and risks.”* This address gains extra significance in the light of recent incidents. For example, in Syria - signatory of the BTWC - there has rightly been much concern in regard to the use of chemical weapons.<sup>1</sup> However, as the Secretary-General pointed out, biological weapons could have a far greater impact. In these times of excessive violence this is very worrying.

We join the UN Secretary General's encouragement of the States Parties to the BTWC to use the opportunity offered by the Eighth Review Conference to significantly enhance this preparedness. Several proposals for improving transparency of compliance with the convention have been made during the last Intersessional Process. We trust that you will agree on an approach that is adequate for addressing your Responsibility to Protect the Biosecurity of global citizens.

In addition, we reiterate our plea to strive for synergy with other international organisations and national basic healthcare and sanitary facilities and emergency responders responsible for global public health and food security. This is especially relevant for poor people in the least developed countries, who have as much right to protection of their biosecurity as anybody else. Besides, since the biological agents don't recognize borders, any outbreak, wherever and however it may originate, has the potential to spread all around the globe.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-chemicalweapons-idUSKCN11M1UU>

Two aspects related to science and technologies relevant to the Convention need to be addressed at the Review Conference. The first issue is the ongoing controversy about balancing biosecurity and academic and entrepreneurial freedom. Recent news about alleged plans for bioterrorism is indeed worrisome, but should not result in panic-driven window-dressing that stifles progress in science and innovation in the life sciences without improving the protection of citizens' biosecurity. The primary responsibility to protect biosecurity rests in the hand of the States Parties to the BTWC and governments of other countries that are yet to sign or ratify it.

The second issue is reorganising "Science for Policy": while progress in science and technology relevant to the Convention has been monitored for decades, a consensus appears to be emerging that what has been done hitherto is inadequate. Several proposals have been made for setting up a new or improved process to provide scientific advice to the States Parties to the BTWC. We support the setting up of an effective process. However, for an effective process, there is a vital need for both transparency and balance. Transparency means that the contents of the advice and the underlying data should be made publicly available in an online clearing house that is also accessible to civil society organisations and experts in developing countries. Balance requires the participation of all States Parties as well as engaging relevant experts from social sciences and humanities with expertise in bioethics and biosecurity in addition to natural scientists and biotechnologists. Care should be taken to avoid restricting the agenda to technical and legal issues, as this might cover up underlying economic, political and ethical issues that must also be addressed for the sake of an effective ban on biological weapons. Furthermore, it should be recognised that the science and technology we are talking about are incredibly fast growing disciplines, creating new challenges to the biosecurity of citizens.

A number of proposals have been made during the intersessional programme in the years 2012-2015 for strengthening the Convention. We hope these initiatives will culminate in concrete steps during the present Eighth Review Conference. These steps will have to strike a balance between protecting citizens against hostile uses of life sciences and offering scientists, industry and society at large the opportunities to create new knowledge and beneficial applications.

As you have a busy schedule during this Conference, we limit ourselves to these considerations. Thank you for your attention. Pax Christi International wishes you fruitful discussions and a successful Review Conference.

Geneva, 8 November 2016.