BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS CONVENTION MEMBERS HOLD FIRST ANNUAL MEETING

States Parties Meet in Geneva to Discuss Ways of Strengthening National Measures against Biological Weapons

The first of three annual Meetings of the States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) will be held in Geneva from 10 to 14 November 2003 in a new process to strengthen the implementation and effectiveness of the Convention. The Convention prohibits its members from developing or otherwise acquiring or retaining biological or toxin weapons.

The Meeting of States Parties will develop the work begun at an August Meeting of Experts on two topics: the adoption of necessary national measures to implement the prohibitions set forth in the Convention, including penal legislation; and national mechanisms to establish the security of pathogenic micro organisms and toxins. The aim of discussing these two topics is to give greater practical effect to the prohibitions contained in the Biological Weapons Convention through the sharing of information, ideas and best practices among States Parties, in order to assist each member to improve its national capacity to respond to the threat of biological weapons.

At the Meeting of States Parties, delegates are expected to participate in a higher-level and more pragmatic discussion of ideas and proposals related to improved national implementation of the BWC, which were discussed on a technical and scientific level at the Meeting of Experts. Ambassador Tibor Tóth of Hungary, Chairman of both meetings, said today that he was optimistic that BWC States Parties would be ready to take the next step beyond the technical discussions held at the Meeting at Experts, and focus on practical measures dealing with the key common themes that had emerged at that meeting.

In 2004 the focus of the new process will shift to enhancing international capabilities for responding to, investigating and mitigating the effects of cases of alleged use of biological weapons or suspicious outbreaks of disease, and to strengthening national and international efforts against infectious diseases. The dates for the 2004 meetings will be decided during this Meeting of States Parties. The 2005 meetings will address codes of conduct for scientists.
The new process was established by the Fifth Review Conference of the BWC, which concluded its resumed session in November 2002 following a controversial suspension in December 2001. The suspension was due to serious disagreements among States Parties on how to proceed following the collapse of negotiations on a legally-binding protocol to strengthen the BWC. At its resumed session, however, the Review Conference decided by consensus that States Parties would meet annually (until the next Review Conference in 2006) to "to discuss, and promote common understanding and effective action on" specific topics related to better implementation of the BWC. Each of these annual meetings is to be preceded by a meeting of experts.

The BWC, formally known as the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction, opened for signature in 1972 and entered into force in 1975, and is the first multilateral disarmament treaty banning an entire category of weapons. It currently has 151 States Parties, with a further 16 having signed but not yet ratified.

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