

BAN ON BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS IS BEING REVIEWED AND STRENGTHENED IN GENEVA

United Nations Secretary-General to Address Opening of Conference on 20 November
16 November 2006

States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) will meet in Geneva from 20 November to 8 December for the Sixth Review Conference of the Convention. BWC review conferences are held every five years to ensure that the purposes and provisions of the Convention - prohibiting the development, production and stockpiling of biological and toxin weapons - are being realised.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, will address the opening session of the conference on 20 November, and is expected to stress the importance of renewed and innovative measures to help prevent both States and non-state actors (such as terrorist groups) from obtaining biological weapons. In an earlier message to BWC States Parties, the Secretary-General said "it is increasingly understood that bolstering the biological security regime has become a matter of tremendous importance for global health and international peace and security".

The previous review conference, held in 2001, saw serious divisions among States Parties following the controversial collapse of negotiations on a new protocol intended to strengthen the BWC with verification and other measures. The Sixth Review Conference offers the chance for States Parties to build on a programme of work established by the Fifth Review Conference aimed at improving the implementation of the BWC, and to explore new possibilities for strengthening barriers against biological weapons. The conference is also an opportunity for States Parties to consider how changes in the international environment since 2001 - in particular the increased focus on terrorism, rapid advances in biotechnology, and concerns about naturally-occurring diseases such as SARS and avian influenza - may affect the role and operation of the BWC.

The President-designate of the Sixth Review Conference, Ambassador Masood Khan of Pakistan, is optimistic on the prospects of the conference, which he describes as "a crucial opportunity for the international community to step up efforts against the threat posed by biological weapons, and to ensure that the great strides being made in biological science and technology are used only for the benefit of people around the world". He says there is a "strong possibility of bringing the international community to one platform", and that the conference could "represent a peak in disarmament diplomacy".

In addition to an article-by-article review of the Convention itself, the conference is expected to deal with a wide range of issues, including:

- the results of the 2003 –2005 intersessional work programme (see below);
- the Confidence-Building Measures created at the Second Review Conference and last updated at the Third Review Conference in 1991;
- obtaining universal adherence to the Convention;
- relevant scientific and technological developments;
- a new intersessional work programme for 2007 – 2010;

- scientific and technological cooperation and exchanges;
- bioterrorism;
- compliance and verification;
- coordination with other organizations involved in preventing or responding to biological weapons (for example WHO; Interpol; and UN Security Council Resolution 1540);
- implementation support arrangements.

The Fifth Review Conference in 2001 established an intersessional work programme "to discuss, and promote common understanding and effective action on" specific topics related to better implementation of the BWC. Attended by almost a hundred states and their technical experts, as well as numerous intergovernmental, non-governmental, professional, industrial and academic organizations, these meetings considered:

- practical ways of strengthening national measures against biological weapons through national legislation and biosecurity measures;
- measures to strengthen and broaden national and international institutional efforts and existing mechanisms for the surveillance, detection, diagnosis and combating of infectious diseases affecting humans, animals, and plants;
- measures to enhance international capabilities for responding to, investigating and mitigating the effects of cases of alleged use of biological weapons or suspicious outbreaks of disease; and
- ways in which the development and implementation of codes of conduct for scientists might help prevent the use of science, particularly the life sciences and biotechnology, in ways that might lead to the development or use of biological weapons.

The Biological Weapons Convention, more formally referred to as the Convention on 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. The BWC is the first multilateral disarmament treaty banning an entire category of weapons. It currently has 155 States Parties, with a further 16 states having signed but not yet ratified.

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