

SIXTH REVIEW CONFERENCE ON BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS CONVENTION CONTINUES GENERAL DEBATE

21 November 2006

The Sixth Review Conference of the States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction continued its general debate this morning, during which speakers raised such issues as the threat of bioterrorism and the need for the Convention to remain relevant in that context; and the need to strengthen implementation of the Convention.

Advances in life sciences and biotechnology, coupled with increased concerns over the threat of bioterrorism, meant that this meeting was being held at an important juncture. Speakers said it was vital that the Convention remained relevant and ready to meet those challenges, and States should work together to agree a pragmatic process to enhance collective security. The biological threat was reinforced by the menace posed by bioterrorism. Rapid advances in the field of life sciences to utilize microbes and toxins made it even more imperative to be alert, and the international community should meet the challenges posed by the fast-evolving nature of the problem.

Speakers acknowledged that the Biological Weapons Convention was a cornerstone of the international security regime, and a key tool in global efforts to stem the spread of weapons of mass destruction. However, the Convention was not yet a global one, and it was for this reason that States should be mobilized to ensure universalisation, and to underscore its importance, as these were dangerous and indiscriminatory weapons, and progress had been very slow. Efforts to strengthen the effective application of the provisions of the Convention should be supported, as suppressing these weapons would facilitate disarmament in general.

Given the limitations in effective implementation of the Convention, it was necessary to have a multilateral mechanism for surveillance in a binding matter. It was important to work actively to operate the Convention and ensure that it became a global and universal Convention, with a concentrated campaign to make the Convention universal, speakers said. Further, there should be a strengthened review mechanism, with a balanced and effective intersessional process, and an effective verification mechanism. A new follow-up mechanism, with a comprehensive and thematically structured mandate that would provide a needed continuity between Review Conferences, was urged by several speakers.

Speaking this morning were representatives of Nigeria, New Zealand, France, Venezuela, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan, Bangladesh, and Thailand. Speaking in a right of reply was Syria.

Also speaking were the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Criminal Police Organization, the World Organization for Animal Health, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Criminal Weapons.

The next plenary session of the Conference will be held at 3 p.m. this afternoon, when

it is scheduled to conclude the general debate.

Statements

JOSEPH AYALOGU (Nigeria) assured States parties to the Biological Weapons Convention of Nigeria's willingness and determination to vigorously implement the Convention to ensure that the world was made a safe place for mankind. Nigeria was fully committed to that cause and joined the progressive nations of the world in the fight against the threat of biological attacks.

Nigeria recalled that, at the Fifth Review Conference of States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention, held in 2002, it had been agreed by consensus to hold three annual meetings commencing in 2003 up to 2005 on five broad topics at the level of the Meeting of Experts. The outcome of those deliberations would form part of the subject of discussion at the present Review Conference. The forum would also afford States Parties the opportunity to undertake a holistic examination of implementation efforts on a Convention that had been in operation for over 30 years. The Conference would have to take into account some developments and new trends that might have impacted the Convention, and attempt to contain them without hampering the objective of the Convention.

CHARLOTTE DARLOW (New Zealand) said that the Convention was a cornerstone of the international security regime, and a key tool in global efforts to stem the spread of weapons of mass destruction. The proposed programme of work was welcome, as the article-by-article review of the Convention and the many cross-cutting issues that States parties would consider in tandem would contribute to a stronger biological weapons control regime.

Achieving a legally binding verification mechanism for the Convention should remain a key goal. Pending the successful conclusion of any verification protocol, confidence-building measures had an important role to play in enhancing transparency with respect to States parties' compliance with the Convention. Intersessional meetings could address issues in more depth, and could consider recent developments and innovations, as well as facilitating active participation of relevant experts and international agencies in the technical details of the Convention's work. Advances in life sciences and biotechnology, coupled with increased concerns over the threat of bioterrorism, meant that this meeting was being held at an important juncture. It was vital that the Convention remained relevant and ready to meet these challenges, and States should work together to agree a pragmatic process to enhance collective security.

MICHÈLE RAMIS-PLUM (France) said that France was confident they would achieve success during the course of the Review Conference. The biological threat was a most topical one. The biological threat had now been reinforced by the menace posed by bioterrorism. France had made a number of specific proposals for the Conference to focus its work on, including reinforcing the norms prohibiting all biological weapons and supporting universal adherence to the Convention; reinforcing the climate of confidence among States parties to the Biological Weapons Convention by ensuring a better participation in the confidence-building measures; and encouraging a sustained dialogue among States parties, similar to the one developed

during the intersessional process launched in 2002.

To implement those objectives, France together with its partners in the European Union, had specific proposals to make. Finally, France recalled that it was a party to the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which constituted the first building block in the regime to prohibit biological weapons.

OSCAR CARVALLO (Venezuela) said that the Conference, with the support of the States parties, should achieve satisfactory results in improving the efficiency of the international instrument with regards to international peace and security. There had been a lack of progress in elimination and reduction of weapons of mass destruction, in particular nuclear weapons, over the past few years, and biological weapons had not escaped that negative trend. Given that situation, States parties, in particular those with weapons of mass destruction, should comply strictly with their obligations in order to contribute to international peace and security. The existence of weapons was a danger for the human race, and sustainable peace, which benefited all, was very fragile.

The efforts to strengthen the effective application of the provisions of the Convention should be supported, as suppressing these weapons would facilitate disarmament in general. Given the limitations in the effective implementation of the Convention, it was necessary to have a binding multilateral surveillance mechanism. There was a need for mechanisms for both monitoring and verification, and a legally binding Protocol should be negotiated. States parties should promote the objectives established by the Fourth Review Conference in 1996, and the Convention should be implemented in a balanced and integral manner in the fields of regulation, integration, and compliance.

MOHAMMED LOULICHKI (Morocco) said that Morocco attached great importance to a thorough and full review of the operation of the Biological Weapons Convention, including consideration of the work of the three intersessional meetings of experts and States parties in 2003, 2004 and 2005, to identify, discuss and agree on the measures to be taken to further strengthen the Convention. Morocco supported the establishment of a new follow-up mechanism, with a comprehensive and thematically structured mandate that would provide a needed continuity between Review Conferences.

Morocco was also ready to discuss the improvement of the existing Biological Weapons Convention confidence-building measures to enhance their potential to strengthen compliance with the Convention and to improve transparency. Morocco added that universal adherence to the Convention was an objective that they should all be working for, as a limited membership might erode confidence in the Convention's capacity to address the security of States parties.

NASSER MOHAMAD AL-ALI (Qatar) said that the Convention had always been the cornerstone document for the preservation of international peace and security. The Convention was not yet a global one, and it was for that reason that States should be mobilized to ensure universalization, and to underscore its importance, as these were dangerous and indiscriminatory weapons, and progress had been very slow. The Convention did not enjoy the interest enjoyed by other Conventions. There should be

participation by non-governmental organizations and the media. It was important to work actively to operationalize the Convention and ensure that it became global and universal. In addition, the importance of the use of new biosciences to benefit mankind should be emphasized, while taking into account that biological weapons caused fear and required coordination and cooperation between the various members of the international community.

By basing their deliberations on the commitment to discharge responsibilities with regards to international peace and security, progress would be assured. Qatar had worked tirelessly for the Convention's application, and to combat the spread of international terrorism and of biological weapons. Qatar was sparing no effort to consolidate peace and security among its citizens and those of the world, and was working for the elimination of weapons of mass destruction.

MOHAMED HASSAN (Sudan) said that, despite numerous benefits emanating from the field of biotechnology and medicine, those breakthroughs also entailed considerable risks as they could at the same time be used for the development of lethal weapons. Biological agents could be easily acquired. Sudan's accession to the Biological Weapons Convention in 2002 was in accordance with their commitment to the United Nations Charter. Sudan stressed its commitment to supporting universal adherence to the Convention. Sudan had also acceded to the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1999.

Sudan was finalizing national legislation to consolidate its accession to the Convention. It looked forward to the efforts of the Secretary-General of the United Nations to assist developing and least developed countries in implementing their obligations under the Convention and establishing corresponding national legislation.

TOUFIQ ALI (Bangladesh) said Secretary-General Kofi Annan had noted yesterday that the horror of biological weapons was shared by all. The 1925 Geneva Protocol had banned the use of biological and toxin weapons, but since coming into effect in 1975, the Convention had remained the central pillar of the international regime for the prohibition of such weapons. Yet, the threat of biological weapons was not less today than it had been in 1975 or 1925. Rapid advances in the field of life sciences to utilize microbes and toxins made it even more imperative to be alert, and the international community should meet the challenges posed by the fast-evolving nature of the problem.

Approaching the Conference, it was clear that there were many important areas where efforts needed to be redoubled to ensure effective implementation of the Convention. The Conference should therefore focus on, among others, a concentrated campaign to make the Convention universal; a strengthened review mechanism, with a balanced and effective intersessional process; an effective verification mechanism; and enhanced international cooperation on Article X implementation, particularly with regard to technology transfer. There was a need to emerge from the culture of despondency that had befallen disarmament negotiations in recent years.

CHAIYONG SATJIPANON (Thailand) said that Thailand believed that the Convention was as important today as it had been when it was adopted in 1972. It was a living document, and States parties to the Biological Weapons Convention had the

responsibility to update it to deal with new developments. Thailand believed that strengthening of the Convention could be realized by universal adherence to it.

Each individual State had the responsibility to take the necessary measures at the national level to ensure the implementation of the Convention. For its part, Thailand had put in place national legislation that was in accordance with its obligations under the Biological Weapons Convention.

Right of Reply

HUSSEIN ALI (Syria), speaking in a right of reply, said that, on Monday morning the United States delegation had made accusations with regards to Syria. Those accusations were wrong – and the entire world was used to this double standard and selectivity in the reports of the United States State Department. No longer did any one believe the political accusations in those reports. Secondly, if the Americans were sincere in their concern to put an end to the spread of weapons of mass destruction, they would do better to approve the draft resolution before the Security Council, which had been submitted by Syria on behalf of the Arab Group in 2003, and which endeavoured to ensure that the Middle East was completely free of weapons of mass destruction. Every one knew the United States of America had vetoed that project.

If the delegation were equally sincere in their intentions and policies on the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, they would do better to convince Israel to become a member to all the Conventions restricting and banning weapons of mass destruction. Israel, thanks to the support of the United States, had a huge arsenal of bacteriological, chemical and nuclear weapons. The American Administration had offered Israel a huge number of toxin and fragmentation bombs, which had been used against Lebanon over the summer. The continuation of that state of affairs – in which Israel had neither ratified nor become a member of the Convention on Biological Weapons – had not stopped the United States from continuing to accuse Syria, which had proved its commitment to eliminating weapons of mass destruction.

Statements by International Organizations and Agencies

BRIGITTE TROYOH, of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), said the Review Conference was an opportunity to recall the ultimate objective of the Biological Weapons Convention, as stated in its preamble: “to exclude completely the possibility of biological agents and toxins being used as weapons”. Both the urgency and complexity of achieving that objective increased each year as our lives and societies were increasingly shaped by what had been called the “age of biotechnology”. It was also important to recall that the Convention was intended to serve the interests of all humanity. Its origins were not only in the disarmament field, but could also be traced directly to the 1925 Geneva Protocol – a landmark in international humanitarian law.

Among the issues that the ICRC urged States parties at the Review Conference to turn their attention to were increasing efforts to ensure universal adherence to the Biological Weapons Convention; increasing engagement of all relevant national actors in implementation and preventive efforts; adopting national implementing legislation; and establishing a series of expert meetings and meetings of States Parties

that would consider, among other things, recent scientific developments, the strengthening and possible extension of confidence-building measures and the responsibilities of life scientists and industry.

RONALD K. NOBLE, of International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol), said terrorists remained committed to perpetrating large-scale violence, and there was a lot of evidence that they had a strong interest in the use of biological weapons. Undoubtedly, Al-Qaida was still considering the use of chemical or biological weapons to perpetrate its terrorist actions, and the only restraint they faced was the technical complexity of operating them properly and effectively. Interpol was active and innovative in its commitment to help law enforcement to do all in its power to confront the threat of bioterrorism, but law enforcement could not effectively tackle the threat alone, and should do so in partnership with professionals from other relevant disciplines. All of the relevant professional communities should come together to establish and implement protocols and procedures, to share information and cooperate in prevention and detection efforts, to mobilize response resources in the event of an attack or natural outbreak, and to coordinate those efforts.

GIDEON BRÜCKNER, of the World Organization for Animal Health, said that the most effective way of preventing bioterrorism using animal pathogens was to strengthen the ability and capacity of national veterinary services to early detect, diagnose and respond to incidental or deliberate disease incursions, within the World Organization for Animal Health guidelines, recommendations and international standards, as mandated by the World Trade Organization. In fact, 60 per cent of human pathogens were zoonotic; 80 per cent of animal pathogens were multi-host; 80 per cent of pathogenic agents having a potential bioterrorist use were zoonotic; and animal diseases could, today, with the effects of globalization and the speed of international traffic, spread faster across the globe than the average incubation period of most diseases. The organization therefore accepted the obligation and responsibility of the veterinary profession to create an effective buffer between the animal source of the disease and the need for human and animal safety and health.

JAN SLINGENBERGH, of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN (FAO), said the areas of work undertaken by FAO that were relevant to the meeting comprised biosecurity in agriculture, plant protection, food safety, and emergency support to disaster operations. Of special interest were the emerging zoonotic diseases, related to globalization and global factors. The World Health Organization (WHO), the World Organization for Animal Health and FAO regularly joined forces in facing those challenges. Avian flu was a crisis that had already hit three continents. Public administration – not just public health and veterinary services, but also the police, customs and the military – had played an important role with regard to such outbreaks. There were a number of tools available to fight avian flu, but caution was required. For every region or subregion, local platforms were critically important, in particular when it came to monitoring disease problems. Progress in those areas could be better, but there was synergy in this area between WHO, the World Organization for Animal Health and the FAO.

MALIK AZHAR ELLAHI, of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), said that both in their origin and in their objectives, the Biological Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention had mutually

reinforcing complementarities. In the preamble of the Biological Weapons Convention the international community had articulated the aspiration to eliminate both biological and chemical weapons, expressing the hope for "reaching an agreement on effective measures also for the prohibition of chemical weapons". That objective had been realized in the shape of the Chemical Weapons Convention that today represented one of the most successful disarmament and non-proliferation instruments ever negotiated by the international community. In less than a decade of its operation, the Convention had attracted the adherence of 181 countries. Its disarmament agenda was being effectively implemented, and the OPCW had emerged as an institution that was efficiently carrying out its mandate in accordance with the provisions of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

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