



THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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REMARKS TO THE SIXTH REVIEW CONFERENCE
OF THE BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS CONVENTIONGeneva, 20 November 2006

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Five years ago, in this very room, you faced the dire prospect of stalemate and deadlock. In becoming States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention, you had demonstrated your determination to do your part in preventing disease from being used as a weapon. But when it came to strengthening the Convention through a protocol, years of negotiations had failed to achieve a consensus. Deep and bitter divisions threatened to bring collective efforts against biological weapons to a permanent halt.

Yet because of your commitment and resourcefulness, history took a different path. You decided that the threat of biological weapons was too important to be abandoned to political paralysis. And you found a way, if not to resolve your differences, then to work around them. Over the past four years, you have created, developed and carried out an innovative work programme, drawing on the knowledge and experience of legal, scientific, security, public health and law enforcement experts from around the world. This programme has made a modest but practical contribution to the implementation of the Convention, and has reduced the risk of biological weapons being developed, acquired or used.

In particular, national implementation of the Convention has been improved, and the security of dangerous pathogens has been tightened. National and international capacities for disease surveillance are being strengthened. The links between natural and deliberate outbreaks of disease, and our responses to them, are being improved. And the international scientific community has been invited to play a role through education and efforts to promote a culture of awareness upon which best practices and codes of conduct could be built.

All States Parties can take credit for this achievement. All have made compromises; many have deferred their ambitions; and some have had reservations. But all have demonstrated real commitment, and turned an interim measure into a remarkable success. This is multilateralism as it should be: flexible, responsive, creative and dynamic; and above all, focused on overcoming obstacles and delivering results.

Now it is time to build on those results, and take further steps to ensure that the Convention will continue to serve as an effective barrier against biological weapons.

In the five years since the last review conference, global circumstances have changed, and risks evolved. We see today a strong focus on preventing terrorism, as well as renewed concern about naturally occurring diseases such as SARS and avian flu. These developments have transformed the environment in which the Convention operates, and altered ideas about its role and potential. Over the same period, advances in biological science and technology continued to accelerate, promising enormous benefits for human development, but also posing potential risks.

These changes mean that we can no longer view the Convention in isolation, as simply a treaty prohibiting States from obtaining biological weapons. Rather, we must look at it as part of an interlinked array of tools, designed to deal with an interlinked array of problems. Certainly, we need to deal with disarmament and non-proliferation in the traditional sense. But we must also address terrorism and crime at the non-state and individual levels, with responses encompassing public health, disaster relief and efforts to ensure that the peaceful uses of biological science and technology can safely reach their potential.

And that means stitching these strands into a coherent strategy. In recent months -- and again two days ago here in Switzerland -- I have raised the idea of a forum that would bring together the various stakeholders -- industry, science, public health, governments, and the public writ large -- in an effort to ensure that biotechnology's advances continue to be used for the benefit of humanity while the risks are managed.

Distinguished delegates, this review conference can make a major contribution to that effort. I urge you to bring together the capacities of all who are gathered here. Treaties are an essential part of the multilateral system, and can be strengthened by building bridges to different fields. This would also ensure that our actions are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Furthermore, building public health capacities can strengthen safeguards against bioterrorism. And being better prepared to deal with terrorism can mean better public health systems overall. Similarly, the availability of training and technology is crucial to improving laboratory safety and security, and making labs safe and secure encourages cooperation and creates opportunities for development. There are many other links and possibilities. I encourage you to explore them, and not to return to the confrontational approaches of the past.

Your efforts over the past four years have put you in a good position to make further progress. Differences will remain. But I urge you to find, once again, creative and resourceful ways around them. Far more unites you than divides you. The horror of biological weapons is shared by all. As the Convention states, their use would be "repugnant to the conscience of mankind". I urge you to seize the opportunity presented by this conference. The United Nations will continue to support you.

Thank you very much.