INES statement to the Preparatory Meeting for the Eighth Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, Geneva, August 2016

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Distinguished Representatives, Ladies and Gentlemen, We very much appreciate the opportunity to make a statement to the Preparatory Meeting for the Eighth Review Conference for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC), which I am doing on behalf of the International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility (INES).

Mr. Chairman,

Developments in the life sciences are advancing rapidly on a global scale, and the benefits and risks involved with this work have to be dealt with responsibly at the international level. There is a need for collective assessment and adjustment by all States Parties in order to provide consistent international governance of the advances in science and technology, and the BTWC is the forum for this assessment.

The relevance of advances in the life sciences and related fields for the Convention was recognized in particular by the last Review Conference in 2011, which agreed that there should be a Standing Agenda Item (SAI) for the review of developments in science and technology in the intersessional process (ISP) meetings of 2012-2015.

While some common understandings have indeed been reached during this 2012-2015 ISP, virtually no effective action has been taken on these understandings, despite this improved focus on science and technology developments. It points up the fact that the structure of the ISP format is simply not suited to a sustained and focussed dialog among experts and policy makers about the relevance of the advances in science and technology for the Convention. The time allotted to science and technology during the ISP was on the average a mere 4.5 hours a year.1 It is no wonder that there is wide-spread dissatisfaction concerning the outcome of the reviews, witnessed by the growing number of Working Papers prepared by States Parties that call for a more action-oriented way of proceeding in the review of developments in science and technology.2 Indeed, the frustration of many delegates is reflected in the words of one of our interview partners during this 2012-2015 ISP: We are getting a lot of material on the table, but what are we going to do about it?

Mr. Chairman,

There can be no further delay in taking effective action. Since the last Review Conference in 2011, the gain-of-function studies on deadly influenza viruses and the development of the CRISPR/Cas technologies represent formidable challenges for the Convention that require immediate response by the States Parties. Several concrete models of procedure that would lead to more effective action have been proposed by States Parties to the BTWC. INES

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1 See Switzerland (BWC/MSP/2015/WP.10). Available at http://www.unog.ch.
2 See for example Working Papers prepared for the Preparatory Committee Meetings 2016 by Finland, Norway and Sweden (WP7); Switzerland (WP8); Russian Federation (WP2); UK (WP4); USA (WP3); and the EU (WP.5). Available at http://www.unog.ch.
considers that restructuring the Intersessional Period to create a Working Group that carries out an annual review of developments in science and technology would be the best way to achieve effective action. For those States Parties that feel they cannot afford to participate in a working group review process, States Parties that are in a position to do so could act as sponsors.

We thus urge that the States Parties to the Eighth Review Conference of the BTWC agree the following measures:

1. States Parties to the BTWC agree to establish an open-ended Working Group to review developments in science and technology. Participation shall be open to all States Parties, with inputs as needed from experts in relevant scientific areas from academia as well as experts from industry and experts in the field of education. The scientific experts should all be well-informed of dual use biosecurity issues and the BTWC.

2. The Working Group shall meet for one week each year to review relevant developments in science and technology, assess their implications for the Convention and make recommendations for measures that will ensure the freedom to pursue responsible science and provide security against intentional as well as unintentional misuse of the products, technological advances and knowledge resulting from work in the life sciences.

3. Particular consideration shall be given to the analysis of comprehensive oversight management policies for dual use scientific work of concern, with the view to identifying good practices that can serve as guidelines for all States Parties to implement and thus comply with their obligations to the Convention in this regard. As any oversight policy will not be effective unless those working in the life sciences and related fields are well aware of dual use issues and the BTWC, aids for States Parties in instituting such education and awareness-raising at the national level shall also be identified.

4. The results of the Working Group meetings shall be presented to the annual Meeting of States Parties for delegates to review and make decisions on the recommendations.

Mr. Chairman,

The Eighth Review Conference stands at a turning point. The way it proceeds will determine the future of the Convention. INES urges the BTWC to move forward, to go beyond agreeing common understandings and take the necessary first steps to enable the conversion of these understandings into concrete measures that can truly strengthen the Convention through implementation. If real progress is to be made in dealing responsibly with advances in the life sciences and related fields, decisions for a more action-oriented annual review of science and technology developments need to be in the Final Report of the Eighth Review Conference.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman

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