8 August 2016 | Statement on behalf of the Benelux-countries, at the Preparatory Committee for the 8th Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC).

by the Kingdom of the Netherlands

Mr. Chairman,

I have the pleasure to speak on behalf of the Benelux-countries; Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

Let me start by expressing our appreciation for your consultations and efforts as Chair of this Preparatory Committee and as President-designate of the 8th Review Conference. I assure you that our delegations will contribute actively to making your Chairmanship and Presidency a success.

Mr. Chairman,

We fully align ourselves with the statement of the European Union that will be delivered later. In addition, we would like to make the following remarks:

As the current agenda item is aimed at States Parties presenting their proposals for the future of the BTWC, the Benelux-countries wish to draw your attention to one proposal in particular: the peer review mechanism. Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands have tabled a working paper in this regard that aims to demonstrate the relevance of the peer review concept within the framework of the BTWC. Moreover, we hope to alleviate possible concerns States Parties might have.

France organized the first peer review within the framework of the BTWC in 2013. Two years later, the three Benelux-countries jointly conducted a peer review exercise to help advance the discussion on this initiative that aims to strengthen the Convention. The Benelux approach to the peer review concept involved declarations (in the form of the Confidence Building Measures), written and oral consultations and on-site visits to relevant facilities, as declared in CBM form A.

Having conducted a peer review, the Benelux-countries are convinced that this innovative concept has several advantages for States Parties:
1) **Enhanced national implementation**
   Peer reviews enable States Parties to share best practices and to learn from each other’s experiences. Through discussion, consultation and clarification by qualified experts, States Parties are able to both reflect on their national implementation and benefit from lessons learned.

2) **Improved transparency and confidence in compliance**
   By providing a framework for sharing information and experiences, peer reviews broaden mutual understanding and increase transparency among participating states. This bolsters confidence in compliance and in the functioning of the Convention.

3) **Increased international cooperation**
   Peer reviews further provide a good opportunity to establish contacts between different national agencies and to explore ways to increase international cooperation. This strengthens cooperation, not only between States Parties, but also between their respective stakeholders.

4) **More awareness of the BTWC among national stakeholders**
   Peer reviews ensure that the Convention remains a living instrument among experts and practitioners within States Parties. By involving professionals working with biological agents, awareness of the Convention increases among experts. Moreover, they will become increasingly familiar with the biosecurity-related risks of their profession.

Mr. Chairman,

Due to its voluntary nature, the peer review mechanism allows for a wide degree of autonomy for the organizing State(s) to determine the format, scope and methods of the exercise. Thereby, the concept fully respects national sovereignty. This also means that attention can be devoted to various aspects of national implementation. The flexibility of the mechanism is illustrated by the various approaches taken by France, the Benelux-countries and, most recently, Germany. Furthermore, it is important to stress that the proposed peer review mechanism is *not* intended as a substitute for verification. Rather, it is a way to take concrete steps towards enhanced national implementation, transparency and confidence in compliance.

Mr. Chairman,

The upcoming 8th Review Conference provides us with the opportunity to strengthen the functioning of the BTWC and consolidate initiatives that contribute to this objective. The Benelux-countries are convinced that the peer review mechanism is such an initiative. We believe that it can provide new impetus to the Convention. Therefore, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands strongly advocate for addressing the issue of the peer review mechanism in the final report of the 8th Review Conference. This would contribute to achieving concrete results at the Conference for a strengthened and more effective Convention.
Thank you.