The Harvard Sussex Program on Chemical and Biological Weapons Statement to the Eighth Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention

Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished Representatives, Colleagues,

The Harvard Sussex Program on Chemical and Biological Weapons (HSP) greatly appreciates the opportunity to present this statement. More than forty-one years has passed since the BWC entered into force and today all States Parties agree that the development or use of biological and toxin weapons, by anyone under any circumstances, is totally prohibited and would constitute a gravely illegitimate act. As the number of States Parties to the Convention continues to increase, it is clear that each recognises that the benefits of the Convention far outweigh the modest costs. This is cause for celebration but there are no grounds for complacency.

This Review Conference comes at a time when both science and security are changing at a rate that threatens to leave the Convention behind. If this Convention is to remain relevant in the face of these challenges, we believe States Parties need to agree a far more ambitious package of measures for this Convention’s future work - a package that attends to all the operative provisions and objectives of the Convention.

Mr President: there are three areas where we strongly urge that progress be made.

Science and Technology

The first area is science and technology. Several States Parties have put forward ideas for enhancing reviews of science and technology and there is, once again, interest in doing something more substantive on this issue. Yet differences remain over the details. We believe that for progress to be made, a shared understanding of the purpose of science and technology review is required before determination and agreement of the best framework to meet that objective. In this regard we stress the importance that whatever is agreed needs to be open to participation by all States Parties; engages with members of the scientific and industrial communities; and assesses both the benefits and challenges of developments in S&T as well as the implications of such developments - both anticipated and unexpected - for all the Articles and objectives of the Convention.

Assistance and Co-operation

The second area we wish to highlight is assistance and cooperation. Recent natural disease outbreaks, such as Ebola and Zika, have highlighted the challenges of dealing with outbreaks of disease whether natural, accidental or deliberate. Progress has been made over the course of the recent intersessional period to develop understandings about what might be required of BWC States Parties should it be determined that a State Party has been 'exposed to danger as a result of violation of the Convention', but far more needs to be done. It is vital that each State Party knows in advance what they will need to do, to whom they might turn, and what resources might be at their disposal. In addition, for progress to be achieved at the Eighth Review Conference a balanced package of measures will be required and implementation of Article X will form a significant part of that balance. We urge states to move beyond repeating and recycling traditional positions over Article X.

Compliance and Reassurance

Compliance is also an area where progress is required. To be effective, every State Party in this Convention must be reassured that the others are fully implementing the Convention. It is time to examine and agree how confidence in compliance may be achieved in a more systematic and structured manner. As part of this examination States Parties should consider how best to exploit existing tools, such as Article V consultations, to strengthen confidence in the implementation of the Convention.

Mr President,

In looking to the future, two other things will be important: first, where there is consensus, States Parties need to be able to make decisions and take collective action between Review Conferences. This is not a radical step, the 2015 Meeting of States Parties decided upon two sessions of the Preparatory Committee. The second is that the
ISU must be suitably resourced and mandated to support any future activities agreed by this Review Conference. In various meetings, including at the PrepCom, States Parties have indicated potential additional tasks that might be undertaken by the ISU during the next intersessional period. It is essential that the ISU be given the necessary mandate and resources to perform both their present tasks and any additional tasks.

Mr President, distinguished delegates: The Harvard Sussex Program has been a long-standing supporter of the Biological Weapons Convention. We remain so, and stand ready to assist you in strengthening the Convention. We wish you a productive Review Conference and thank you for your attention.

Dr Caitríona McLeish
Dr James Revill
8th November 2016

HSP work performed in support of preparations for the 8th Review Conference

Caitríona McLeish and James Revill Keeping up with the Scientists, BWC Review Conference Series, International Law Policy Institute, November 2016


James Revill, Caitríona McLeish, Alex Spelling and Brian Balmer “Options for International Cooperation under Article X of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention” Trust and Verify no. 154, Autumn 2016


Caitríona McLeish “Options for Article X” EU Regional Workshop for Africa, 13-14 September 2016

James Revill “Reviewing Science and Technology” EU Regional Workshop for Africa, 13-14 September 2016


Caitríona McLeish “Options for Article X” EU Regional Workshop for South and South-East Asia, 29-30 August 2016


James Revill “Enhancing confidence in compliance with the BWC”, 5th Consultative Meeting of the EU Non-Proliferation Consortium

James Revill, Caitríona McLeish, Alex Spelling and Brian Balmer Options for Article X, Harvard Sussex Program Briefing Paper, August 2016


James Revill and Caitríona McLeish "Estimating the costs of compliance options for the BWC", Trust and Verify, No. 151, October-December 2015

Alex Spelling, Caitríona McLeish, Brian Balmer Where did the BWC come from? Indicative Timeline and Key Events, 1925-75, March 2015