NATO CONFERENCE ON WMD ARMS CONTROL, DISARMAMENT AND NON-PROLIFERATION

Statement by Ambassador Paul van den IJssel, President-designate of the Seventh Review Conference

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to begin by conveying to the organizers of this meeting my sincere appreciation for being invited to speak before you today. I would also like to thank the Norwegian government for providing this venue and bringing together such distinguished experts from a variety of different fields. The topic of arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation is an important one and something, as Ambassador of the Netherlands to the Conference on Disarmament, I work towards on a daily basis. As President-designate of the Seventh Review Conference of the Biological Weapons Convention I have had the opportunity to witness, from a new perspective, how important multilateral agreements are and the contributions they make to enhancing peace and security around the world. Today I would like to share with you the work of Biological Weapons Convention and the activities its members pursue in creating a world free from biological weapons.

The Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) is an important thread in international arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation measures. Alongside the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Chemical Weapons Convention, it is a fundamental pillar of international efforts to address weapons of mass destruction. The aims and objectives of these treaties are supported by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1540, which consolidates the ban against the acquisition and use of these weapons by non-state actors. Together these regimes provide a robust and flexible fabric that significantly reduces the threat posed by some of the most destructive and inhumane weapons the world has ever produced.

The BWC entered into force on 26 March 1975. It was the first treaty to ban an entire category of weapons. When the treaty came into force, it only had 22 States Parties. That number has now grown to 164, with Mozambique which joined in March being our newest member. The Convention commits states to prohibit the development, production, acquisition, transfer and stockpiling of biological weapons. The BWC affirms an international commitment to ensuring that life sciences and biotechnology are used safely, securely and solely for peaceful purposes.
Global Health Security

The last few years have seen a realisation that certain health and security issues are interlinked. Outbreaks of disease can affect the security of our nations by disrupting services, stretching our health infrastructure and incurring significant costs. Equally, traditional security issues can have significant health implications. This has led to a more comprehensive approach to addressing these issues, where health and security communities work together to address areas of mutual interest. This has become known as global health security.

There is possibly no better example of global health security than that found in the biological arena. Biological risks and threats can have many different origins: some are caused by natural outbreaks of disease; others by accidental release; and a few as the result of a deliberate act. Together they form what is known as the biorisk spectrum. Traditionally, different actors and regimes addressed separate parts of the spectrum: our health communities addressed natural disease outbreaks; the biosafety and occupational health communities worked to manage the risk of accidental release; and the security community worked to prevent the use of biological agents as weapons. While each community has resources to deal with their own specific biological risk or threat, there is also much they have in common. Rather than duplicate activities and waste resources, these communities are increasingly working together to provide for a collective, comprehensive approach for dealing with biological risks and threats.

The BWC is a centre of innovation for such an approach. In addition to the tangible security benefits of an effectively implemented global regime banning the hostile application of the life sciences, the BWC has found ways to add value to existing efforts to deal with other biological risks. The regime works increasingly closely with relevant international partners to do this, including the International Federation of Biosafety Associations, the World Organization for Animal Health, and the World Health Organization, especially on the implementation of the International Health Regulations. The recognition of the importance of global health security can also be seen in the intersessional work programme of States Parties. Both biosafety and dealing with disease regardless of cause were topics covered in considerable detail in the most recent set of annual meetings.

Enhancing Transparency and Building Confidence

The treaty enables sharing of information among states and experts on a broad range of biological activities. Each year State Parties to the Convention are required to submit Confidence Building Measures (CBMs). The CBMs provide for the exchange of information on research centres, laboratories, as well as national biological defence research and development programs. The CBMs also require the documentation of any unusual outbreaks of infectious diseases and similar occurrences caused by toxins. They cover efforts to encourage the publication of research and the promotion of use of knowledge. They also provide an opportunity to exchange information on legislative and regulatory frameworks. The CBMs are a way of compiling data of direct relevance to efforts to strengthen global health security. They also serve as way for states to observe how others are implementing their obligations.
Implementing the Ban

At the last review conference in 2006, States Parties agreed upon a programme of work to discuss and promote common understanding and effective action on ways to strengthen specific aspects of the implementation of the treaty. Each year we examined one or two relevant topics: in 2007 national implementation and regional and sub-regional cooperation; in 2008 biosafety, biosecurity, oversight of science as well as education and awareness raising; in 2009 building capacity to deal with disease; and in 2010 the response to an alleged use of a biological weapon.

The programme was an international process designed to foster national and regional action. Each year we hosted two meetings; a Meeting of Experts in August and a Meeting of States Parties in December. The Meeting of the Experts was crucial to our efforts because it enabled us to gather and refine technical information and experience on the topics being considered. These meetings provided for the active involvement of a range of technical experts from within and outside of government. The information gathered at the Meeting of Experts was then processed and fed into the Meeting of States Parties which reviewed what was being, and what more might need to be, done. The Meeting of States Parties also identified a range of common understandings that would underpin the individual and collective actions States Parties would take.

Supporting Implementation and Building Capacity

A recent innovation under the Convention is the Implementation Support Unit (ISU). The ISU assists in matters related to administration, implementation and universalization of the treaty. The ISU helps to drive forwards the day-to-day work of the Convention, foster new initiatives and support efforts to expand treaty membership. The ISU helps sustain the growing network of partners focusing on the various aspects of health security and opens doorways for further work to build capacity.

The ISU is the treaty’s focal point for facilitating communication. The unit consolidates and maintains details of how states are meeting their various obligations. It also gathers details of relevant initiatives in other international forums as well as the efforts of international, regional, national and local bodies-both inside government and without. It does all this with a staff of three. Because of its size, the ISU serves as an information exchange point but not an assistance provider. The ISU is the centre piece of the broader expert network developing under the BWC.

The Next Steps for the BWC

The next significant step for the BWC will be the Seventh Review Conference to be held in December 2011. These reviews, which occur every five years, assess the treaty’s operation, examine relevant scientific and technological developments, and determine the future direction of the Convention and its programme of work. We will look backwards at what we have achieved and forwards to what we wish to accomplish in the next five years.

Preparations for the review conference are already well under way. In April, we held a Preparatory Committee to agree many of administrative details, clearing the deck for substantive discussions in December. Much thinking has already taken place. There have been informal events held around the world to consider what the review conference should do.
These efforts started with an event in the UK last September. That was followed by meetings in China, Switzerland, Germany, and shortly in the Philippines.

Making the Ban Global

Expanding the membership of the BWC should be a priority for us all. If we are, as it says in the treaty’s preamble, “for the sake of all mankind, to exclude completely the possibility of bacteriological (biological) agents and toxins being used as weapons”, then the norm that underpins such efforts must be universally acknowledged. The BWC enshrines the norm against the weaponization of disease. The most visible way to demonstrate that humanity, collectively, finds these weapons repugnant is to ensure that every state in the world has signed up to the Convention and is actively working to strengthen its implementation. When the treaty becomes universal, it will also become customary international law, reinforcing individual initiatives and supporting activities across the biorisk spectrum.

The last BWC review marked a change in approach. States Parties stepped their efforts up a gear and agreed upon a range of actions to promote universality of the Convention. The plan was three pronged: States Parties agreed to undertake a series of activities themselves; the chairs of the annual meetings were mandated to coordinate their efforts; and the ISU was tasked with supporting the efforts of the Chairs and States Parties. These efforts have yielded results: nine States have joined the BWC since this initiative was taken. This is a good start but more needs to be done. We must find new ways to work, more consistently and with new partners. There is a role to be played in this endeavour by everyone in this room.

The BWC and Multilateralism

One of the priorities of this conference series has been to explore the creation of effective multilateral regimes to address arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. One of the particular strengths of the BWC has been the forum it provides to bring together all those with a stake in ensuring the life sciences do not become the death sciences. It increasingly acts as an umbrella, bringing together a network of collaborations between: international organizations, such as the WHO, OPCW, INTERPOL; national governments, and the broad range of ministries and agencies that have a role to play; the private sector; professional scientific bodies, such as the national academies of science and the international scientific unions; academia; think-tanks; and civil society.

Many of the resources required to deal with the international challenges we face are to be found in hands other than those of governments. As we move forward in our efforts to address these challenges, I believe it is increasingly important that we find ways to engage with, bring on board and leverage these communities. If our problems are to be found in many hands, then the solutions must too. I think there are lessons to be leant from the recent evolution of the BWC. The BWC has found ways to ensure that information channels are wide open, that the disparate actors are connected in new ways, and important steps have been taken to build a strong, flexible and varied community dedicated to ensuring that key technologies are not misused by those with a malign intent.

Conclusion

I believe there is considerable scope to strengthen the way that NATO and the BWC work together. One area which might prove especially fruitful is in responding to unusual or
unnatural disease events. The BWC continues to focus on streamlining efforts to respond to unusual or unnatural outbreaks. The treaty has few capabilities of its own to bring to such a response and relies upon capacities held by others. A major disease outbreak can span boarders and have national security implications. It can overwhelm health capacity. In such circumstances, regardless of the origin of the outbreak, it might become necessary to call upon military resources to reinforce civilian capacity. NATO has access to many of the resources that might be needed.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight, once again, the importance of global health security. The ongoing outbreak of E. coli poisoning in Europe demonstrates that we are still surprised by unusual disease events; that these events can rapidly take on international importance; and that there is likely to be a delay in identifying the origin of such events. For these reasons, a robust, international capability to deal with disease, regardless of its origin, drawing upon the expertise and resources of both the health and security sectors is of critical importance. The BWC has a key role to play here, and this role will only increase in importance.