Meeting of the States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention

Australia

General Statement by HE Ms Sally Mansfield, Ambassador

4 December 2018

Mr Chair

Thank you for your efforts to prepare us for this MSP, particularly on finances. We look forward to constructive deliberations on how we can put the BWC on a sustainable footing. The situation requires our urgent attention and action.

But let’s not forget why this Convention matters.

The BWC is more than 40 years old – but the threat of biological weapons remains.

We are fortunate that so far the prohibition against biological weapons has held. We have not had to respond to a major, deliberate attack with biological agents.

The BWC is far from perfect – as one of the early pieces in the web of WMD-focused conventions it could do with some modernisation.

We were pleased that the meetings of experts got off to a good start in August. We thank the Chairs for steering productive discussions. Australia’s experts presented on gene editing and Australia’s Health Security Initiative. The next challenge is how to take forward some of the good ideas generated. We hope to have useful discussions over the next few days to this end.

Mr Chair

Australia welcomed discussions on Article X reporting (international cooperation) during the experts’ meetings. We think it could be useful if more States Parties submitted regular Article X reports. That would help build a more comprehensive picture over time of international cooperation – both to fill gaps and avoid duplication.

We acknowledge that preparing reports requires planning and consultations across agencies. We hope colleagues had a chance to read Australia’s short Working Paper on the structure and content of our Article X report. This template might be helpful to others as one way to manage the submission of an Article X report. We welcome feedback including on any topics we might have missed.
Mr Chair

Australia is pleased to contribute voluntary funding for the BWC sponsorship program, and extend a warm welcome to States Parties represented here today through that program.

Australia was pleased to support the ISU’s universalisation activities through a funding contribution for the BWC regional workshop hosted by Fiji next week (12-13 December). The workshop will focus on Pacific Island countries not yet party to the Convention.

Mr Chair

Australia supports the UN Secretary-General’s Disarmament Agenda, notably Action 10 on the readiness to investigate alleged use of biological weapons. Working closely with other ‘Friends of the UNSG Mechanism’, we are exploring ways to build a core standing capacity to conduct independent investigations of the alleged use of biological weapons.

We are also active in health security in our region – through our Health Security Initiative, which works across the full spectrum of prevention, detection, outbreak preparedness and response, with a focus on the Indo-Pacific.

Mr Chair

Australia believes that, as parties to this vital convention, we must do all we can to support all facets of the convention, including financially. Each of us, and particularly office holders, should model best conduct in this regard. We are dismayed that despite extensive consultations on the parlous state of the BWC budget, the difficult decision taken to reduce the length of this MSP by one day for financial reasons, and the ongoing diversion of the agenda away from substantive content, some States Parties continue to owe significant debts. We implore all States Parties to ensure their payments are up to date, including assessed contributions for 2019.

The international rules-based order requires constant care and maintenance. The trajectory of activity under the BWC looks set to increase in future years. To maintain and strengthen the BWC, we need to be able to hold effective meetings, and have implementation support.

We should also encourage diversity in the BWC – we need more young men and women to see a career path in this space – whether in government, as scientists, or in civil society. Diversity makes us more effective and leads to more sustainable outcomes.

We look forward to working with all States Parties to achieve a more effective and sustainable BWC which serves all our interests, keeping our world safe from biological weapons.

Thank you