Regional Workshop for the Pacific Region:
Universalisation of the Biological Weapons Convention
Statement by the United States

Thank you for the opportunity for the United States, as a Depositary Government of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, to address this workshop. We greatly appreciate the Government of Fiji’s hosting the event and the European Union’s sponsoring it. The United States places a high priority on universal membership in the Convention. We are delighted that this event is taking place and that you have all been able to participate, particularly those of you representing governments in the Pacific region that have not yet joined the BWC.

I would like to explain why we think universalization of the Convention is so important. Currently, 178 countries are parties to the BWC, but we believe it is vital to make its ban on biological weapons a global norm, upheld and enforced by every nation. We will hear detailed descriptions of the Convention during the workshop, but its core is a legal commitment by its Parties not to retain, acquire, develop, or transfer biological and toxin weapons, and weapons, equipment, and means of delivery designed to use them.

You might be asking yourself why should my country join this Convention? We realize that very few countries actually want biological weapons, but may have competing priorities and find that joining the BWC has not seemed important or relevant enough. I’d like to convince you that it is. Sadly, it remains possible that biological weapons – which are relatively easy to develop, transfer, and conceal – will be used someday. The Convention was drafted at a time when the real concern was large-scale, state-level biological weapons programs, but things have changed. The likelihood that a government would use these weapons has receded. Increasingly, biological weapons are within the reach not only of governments, but
of terrorist and insurgent groups. The world is currently witnessing a resurgence in the use of chemical weapons, and we have no reason to think that those who have used – or might use – such weapons will draw a moral line at the use of bio-weapons.

It is very important to note that the BWC requires Parties to adopt appropriate national measures to “prohibit and prevent” anyone under their jurisdiction from developing, acquiring, or transferring biological weapons and related items. This means that not only universality, but also effective implementation of the BWC’s obligations by all Parties is critical. Fortunately, such implementation is not burdensome for small countries.

However, the work that goes on in BWC meetings today is not just about banning a type of weapon. The Convention contains a commitment to international cooperation in health and the life sciences. I won’t tell you that U.S. health assistance is conditioned on joining the BWC – it isn’t – but our BWC delegations work hard to facilitate such assistance to other Parties. And representatives from a number of our programs regularly attend BWC meetings to make contacts with experts from developing countries and explore ways that we can work together.

BWC-related work also strengthens national and international capabilities to detect and respond to a disease outbreak, regardless of its cause. This is pragmatic – we may not know the cause until long after an outbreak occurs – but it also means that the BWC increasingly plays a complementary role in promoting effective public health systems.

Those are some reasons you should consider joining. What about the costs? They are minimal. The BWC is supported by a tiny, three-person staff. Alex is
one of them. Many developing countries pay less than USD 100 per year, which would be the case for the non-Parties attending this workshop.

We are delighted that Samoa is – in the words of our workshop program – “on the road to accession.” Eighteen countries, mainly in Africa and the Pacific, remain outside the treaty regime, and we look forward to each of them getting on the same road and reaching its ultimate destination of membership in the BWC. The United States strongly encourages the governments of non-Parties represented here today – as well as the other 13 – to take the action necessary to join the BWC. And of course we seek effective implementation of the Convention by all Parties. If it would be useful to your government, the United States stands ready to provide advice and support on accession to and implementation of the BWC.

Thank you very much. I look forward to a successful workshop.