Speech for BWC Workshop on Universalisation in Nadi, Fiji 12th/13th December 2018

The United Kingdom welcomes states from the Pacific Region to this workshop on Universalisation, financially supported by Australia and the Government of Fiji. The United Kingdom welcomes the opportunity to make a statement at this important event.

Over 40 years ago the UK was one of the founders of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention. We remain a Depositary Government, along with Russia and the United States, and we continue to work closely with our fellow depositaries to make progress under the BTWC. The UK maintains a keen interest in this Convention and we continue to be at the forefront of efforts to ensure its effectiveness and continued relevance in an ever-changing world. The UK therefore welcomes this opportunity to contribute, and to emphasise the importance of universalisation and effective implementation of the BTWC as an important step towards a world free from the threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction.

Last week in Geneva, States Parties to the Convention came together and welcomed 3 new member states which have joined in the past year, including Niue from this region, following on soon after Samoa. The 2018 Meeting of States Parties welcomed the increase in the number of ratifications of and accessions to the Convention. The States Parties reaffirmed the particular importance of the universality of the Convention and in this regard urged signatory States to ratify the Convention without delay and also urged those States that have not signed the Convention to accede without delay.

The Biological Weapons Convention now has 182 States Parties. After some years of incremental progress, membership of the Convention is finally getting close to universality.

The UK urges those States which have yet to ratify or accede to the Convention, to do so as soon as possible. This process can often be done best following a regional approach, which enables states with similar national situations and legal systems, for example, to share experience and lessons. We hope that this workshop will build on the success of last year’s, and help additional states to take the necessary steps to join the Convention.
Simply put, the Convention remains the keystone in the global architecture to prevent and counter the misuse of biological sciences for hostile purposes. We all aspire for a world free from the possible threat of biological warfare – that is, the deliberate use of disease as a weapon, whether it is against humans, animals or plants. We cannot afford to compromise or let down our guard.

It is in all our interests that the Convention remains effective and is global in reach, that its prohibitions continue to be upheld, and that its proper place in helping to combat infectious disease is recognised. Our aim in the present context is to ensure that the Biological Weapons Convention remains relevant, by promoting both universalisation and full implementation by all States Parties. This means ensuring that national legislation gives full effect to the Convention, so that anyone who acts in breach of the Convention, including terrorists and criminals, can be held to account.

The UK recognises that those states which are not yet party to the Convention, and which are now considering membership, have to balance this against other domestic and legislative priorities. We would encourage states as a first step to set a clear timeline for becoming Parties to the Convention, thus demonstrating their determination and commitment to reaching this common goal.

Membership of the Convention brings a number of advantages. These include not only joining what is now progressing steadily towards a global consensus against biological weapons, but also gaining access to the possibility of international assistance in the event of a biological weapons attack, including by terrorists.

There is another, easily overlooked advantage from joining the Convention. The process of preparing for ratification and drafting implementing legislation requires consultation involving a range of interested Government Departments and agencies, which may not routinely cooperate. This internal coordination within states is of substantial and continuing value in itself in helping to develop effective national capability to deal with both deliberate biological attacks and naturally occurring disease threats. This is illustrated by the UK’s own experience.
The UK has recently published its national **Biological Security Strategy**, which draws together for the first time the work that takes place across Government to protect us from significant biological risks, whether their cause is natural, accidental or deliberate. The Strategy also explains how in the future we will coordinate our activity more closely and take a truly comprehensive approach to meet the evolving biological risks. The Strategy brings into one place the work of Government Departments and agencies, including those responsible for health, agriculture, defence, foreign affairs, and internal security in a way that promotes further cross-Government coordination. The document is freely available on the internet, and I would be grateful if the organisers of this workshop could share the link with you all.


The UK is a global nation, open to the world and outward facing. We want to reiterate our readiness to share experience, offer assistance and engage with you. We want to continue dialogue on giving best effect to the BTWC so that together we can achieve a safer world.

Thank you.