Statement by Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs

2019 Meeting of States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC)

Delivered by Ms. Anja Kaspersen, Director
UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, Geneva Branch

3 December 2019, Geneva

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to deliver these remarks on behalf of the United Nations High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu.

Ambassador Hwang, congratulations on assuming the chairmanship of the meeting. I wish you success in your efforts to reach consensus on a forward-looking and substantive outcome from the meeting.

I would also take this opportunity to acknowledge the forward-looking leadership of the Chairs of the five Meetings of Experts – Ambassador Victor Dolidze of Georgia, Mr. Yury Nickolaichik of Belarus, Ms. Lebogang Phihlela of South Africa, Mr. Usman Iqbal Jadoon of Pakistan and Mr. Laurent Masmejean of Switzerland.

Distinguished delegates,

As you have heard the Secretary-General allude to, amidst growing geostrategic, social and technological divides in the world, the diplomacy protecting the disarmament architecture is increasingly challenged.

I would thus reiterate the critical importance of the Biological Weapons Convention. It enshrines a strong taboo against the use of disease as a weapon, and any form of deliberate use of disease is universally regarded as morally repugnant and politically illegitimate.

Norm building and upkeep, however, require constant attention and nurturing. They cannot be taken for granted.

Distinguished delegates,
Next year we mark the 45th anniversary of the BWC, a landmark that deserves to be appropriately celebrated. This also presents an opportunity to roll up our sleeves and to explore all avenues for its continued relevance.

The anniversary will be followed by the Ninth Review Conference in 2021. It is essential that the time between now and then is used to the full to prepare a successful outcome.

In this context, allow me to highlight three core elements: preparedness, safeguarding and review capacities.

On preparedness, we have been warned about the growing threats posed by infectious diseases. The Global Preparedness Monitoring Board, co-convened by the World Health Organization and the World Bank Group, stated that there is a very real threat of a rapidly moving, highly lethal pandemic killing 50 to 80 million people. A global pandemic on that scale would be catastrophic, creating widespread havoc, instability and insecurity. The Board also concluded that the world is not prepared for such an eventuality.

Like many of the most pressing issues of our age, biological threats, whether natural or deliberate, cannot be dealt with by nation states acting alone. Given the current geostrategic landscape, it is therefore worrisome that we are nowhere near having a global response mechanism in place.

Multilateralism must be one element of the international response to the increasing biological threats that we face. And, in responding to deliberate biological events, the BWC and its States Parties should fulfil a political leadership role. The Convention is the pre-eminent international instrument for addressing deliberate biological threats.

The United Nations stands ready to assist States Parties in further enhancing the Convention’s leadership role. You have had positive discussions on assistance, response and preparedness and there seem to be several areas of concrete convergences on which I would encourage you to focus in the years ahead.

Distinguished delegates,

On the issue of safeguarding the world is also witnessing incredible advances in science and technology, including in the area of biology. Promoting the peaceful uses of biology is therefore a vital aspect of the Convention’s implementation and the benefits to humanity from these advances in biology need to be safeguarded. The negative repercussions and human cost if these new advances were to be misused with catastrophic consequences are unfathomable and could further exacerbate the aforementioned divides.
A key component of safeguarding is strong national public health systems. They form the front line in the defence against any deliberate biological threat or event and are instrumental to any risk mitigation strategy.

Advances in science and technology can however pose challenges from a security perspective. They can lower the barriers to the acquisition, development and use of biological weapons, including by non-State actors not bound by existing regimes. At the same time, the BWC and other international instruments at our disposal struggle to maintain vigilance over such fast-moving fields of science and technology, which now involve a multitude of different actors.

Distinguished delegates,

This brings me on to my third point, the fact that as new technologies play an increasing role in our lives, so our institutions must be equipped to review and assess the implications. Given the great transformations underway, it is vital that diplomats and scientists work together to tackle our common challenges, particularly to ensure that security concerns do not hamper beneficial scientific advances and their application for the good of humanity.

Therefore, I welcome the proposals made by several States Parties to establish a mechanism within the BWC to comprehensively review relevant developments in science and technology. Such a mechanism would benefit the entire membership of the Convention, particularly if it was mandated to consider the benefits of new technologies as well as the risks they may pose. It could also contribute to transparency and confidence-building between States Parties by providing a collective asset for reviewing relevant developments and increasing understanding of them.

For our part, the UN system is already overseeing several scientific review mechanisms across various domains and my Office stands ready to support your deliberations and to facilitate insights and inputs from other relevant fora.

I am confident that you can resolve the outstanding issues in the time before the Ninth Review Conference. I would strongly encourage you to make every effort to reach consensus on such a mechanism.

Distinguished delegates,

Progress on the three core elements I have mentioned requires a strong and dynamic Convention. The strength of the norm against biological weapons is shown in the growing membership of the Convention which now has 183 States Parties. Despite being almost 45 years old, 10 new States Parties have joined the BWC in the past five years.
I would like to take this opportunity to welcome the United Republic of Tanzania as the newest party to the Convention and acknowledge the presence of representatives from other States which are well on the road to joining the Convention.

With relevance, and the growing risks that I alluded to earlier, comes an attendant responsibility – a responsibility on you as States Parties to not only uphold the Convention but also to reinvigorate it to respond to the challenges ahead and seize opportunities where possible. I am therefore encouraged that you have been discussing the institutional strengthening of the Convention.

In general, two main approaches have been tried - the negotiation of a comprehensive legally-binding instrument and an incremental model based on national measures and agreement on common understandings.

Both approaches have their pros and cons. Is it therefore possible to seek a middle way taking the best elements from each approach? The history of the BWC shows that new initiatives can be agreed, even at times of seemingly irreconcilable differences among States Parties.

Surely today we can design an innovative new model which is responsive to scientific advances and the needs of developing countries while still being rooted in international cooperation. Even on the issues of verification and compliance, might there not be value in revisiting them again more than 20 years after they were last studied?

I would also encourage you to assess the functioning of the BWC. I cannot reiterate enough the importance of diversity in your deliberations, including the full and effective participation of women.

Distinguished delegates,

The issues that I have highlighted above – improving preparedness for deliberate events, safeguarding the peaceful uses of biology, and enhancing capacities for reviewing scientific developments – all show my firm belief in the critical importance and relevance of the BWC.

To argue otherwise risks undermining the only bulwark we have against the deliberate use of disease as a weapon.

This was the message of the High Representative. I join her in wishing you a successful meeting.

Thank you.