Statement by the OPCW at the 2019 Meeting of States Parties to the Biological and Toxins Weapons Convention

As delivered on 4 December 2019, Geneva

Mr Chairman,

1. On behalf of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), I am pleased to address this Meeting of States Parties to the Biological and Toxins Weapons Convention (BWC). Let me join others and congratulate you on your election as Chairperson of the Meeting.

2. As international entities committed to disarmament, the OPCW and the BWC-ISU share complementary missions and face common challenges. Unfortunately, despite the significant progress in achieving founding goals of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the BWC, the threat that chemical or biological materials, including toxins, may be used for hostile purposes remains. This threat challenges the global norms established by the States Parties of both our Conventions, and will require strengthened partnerships to address it.

Mr Chairman,

3. With the complete destruction of States Parties' declared chemical weapons within reach, the OPCW is shifting its focus on preventing their re-emergence. Along these lines, the Organisation is committed to reinforcing its assistance to States Parties in preparing for and responding to the threat of chemical weapons.

4. We see States Parties taking an "all hazards" approach in their national and regional response strategies to chemical incidents, regardless whether they are accidental or deliberate. In operational terms, States Parties establish expertise across the spectrum of CBRN materials. National and regional response frameworks reflect this spectrum as uncertainty may exist whether an incident involves only a toxic chemical, a biological agent, or potentially a combination of CBRN materials.

5. As international organisations at the service of States Parties, we need to take into account State Parties' CBRN approach in capacity building support or when providing specialised assistance.

6. Partnerships and cooperation between international agencies are important for a more adequate response that takes into account each agency’s actions, mandates and obligations.
7. The OPCW is pleased to partner with the BWC-ISU in various areas of mutual interest, such as the project on ‘Strengthening global mechanisms and capacities for responding to the deliberate use of biological agents.’ The OPCW also welcomes opportunities to deepen this cooperation. In particular, the Secretariat stands ready to share our lessons-learned as the BWC-ISU explores establishing an assistance database and securing funding for biological response.

8. Forming constructive partnerships takes time, and concerted efforts. In this regard, OPCW along with UNOCHA, WHO, UNICRI, INTERPOL, and the BWC-ISU, have jointly developed a project to improve inter-agency cooperation when assisting a State Party following a terrorist attack involving a chemical and/or biological weapon. The project builds upon recommendations resulting from an inter-agency table-top exercise conducted in 2017, and will address fundamental aspects of response such as, how agencies communicate with each other during a crisis, and what types of information could be beneficial if exchanged. We aim to implement this project within the framework established by the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism.

Mr Chairman,

9. I would now like to touch upon the topic of technological evolution, another area of common interest.

10. The pace of the evolution in science and technology shows no signs of slowing. It raises questions about its implications for disarmament, and actions to be taken. The OPCW Scientific Advisory Board and OPCW Science Policy Adviser have regularly shared experiences and best practices for providing science advice with the BWC. the OPCW stands ready to continue this engagement as the States Parties here in Geneva debate the possibility of forming a BWC science advice mechanism.

11. The OPCW has committed to maintaining its technical relevance and scientific literacy through various means. For example, our on-going protein bio-toxin exercises coordinated by the OPCW Laboratory; the inclusion of lessons-learned from contingency operations into inspector training; the upgrade the OPCW Laboratory to a Centre for Chemistry and Technology; and the recent Temporary Working Group of the Scientific Advisory Board focused on investigative science and technology, which has relevance for responding to allegations of use of both chemical and biological agents.

Mr Chairman,

12. We move ever-closer to a world free of chemical weapons. However, vigilance and renewed determination with partners are needed to preserve the international norms against use of chemical and biological weapons for future generations.
13. Many challenges in the field of international security test our policies and assumptions. Exchanging ideas and sharing experiences in chemical and biological security nurtures innovation in disarmament. Strengthening our respective treaty regimes, and ensuring they remain strong far into the future, demands our continued commitment.


*****