

**Statement to the First Committee by Ambassador Georgi Avramchev,
Chairman of the 2008 meetings of the Biological Weapons Convention**

New York, 17 October 2008

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

In my capacity as Chairman of the 2008 Meetings of the Biological Weapons Convention, I am pleased to be able to take this opportunity to inform the First Committee of the activities of the States Parties to the Convention, and the progress made in implementing the decisions and recommendations of the 2006 Sixth Review Conference.

As delegates will recall, the Sixth Review Conference was a turning point for the BWC, resolving many of the issues that had bitterly divided States Parties since 2001, and consolidating the approach developed in the 2003-2005 intersessional process. Ending a ten-year hiatus, the Conference agreed on a Final Declaration embodying a common vision for the Convention and its implementation. The Conference also agreed on many practical measures, including:

- A detailed new intersessional work programme to help ensure effective implementation of the Convention until the Seventh Review Conference in 2011;
- Specific measures to obtain universal adherence to the Convention;
- An update of the mechanism for the Convention's confidence-building measures, and foreshadowing a more thorough review in 2011;
- Requiring States Parties to nominate a national point of contact to better coordinate various aspects of national implementation and universalization; and
- Various measures to improve national implementation, including of Article X of the Convention dealing with the peaceful uses of biological science and technology.

Perhaps most significantly, the Conference decided to establish an Implementation Support Unit (ISU) for the Convention, addressing a long-standing need for institutional support for the efforts of States Parties in implementing the Convention itself and the decisions of the review conferences.

We are now in the second year of the four-year intersessional work programme mandated by the Review Conference. As with the previous programme, each year is devoted to one or two specific topics related to improving implementation of the Convention. Two meetings are held each year. A meeting of experts, held in August, brings together a wide range of experts from States Parties, international and regional organisations, and relevant professional, scientific and civil society bodies. The material, ideas and proposals raised and discussed at the meeting of experts are then distilled and refined by the Chairman, and developed into a more politically-oriented set of conclusions at the meeting of States Parties held in December.

The aim of these meetings, and the intersessional process overall, is not to negotiate binding agreements or recommendations, but to "discuss, and promote common understanding and

effective action" on the specific topics being considered. Although no binding commitments emerge, in practice the meetings produce considerable benefit, both through the exchange of information and experience, and through the collection of ideas and proposals into a cohesive package that serves as a common point of reference for States Parties that wish to make use of it.

Last year, under the chairmanship of my distinguished predecessor, Ambassador Masood Khan of Pakistan, the two topics considered were:

1. Ways and means to enhance national implementation, including enforcement of national legislation, strengthening of national institutions and coordination among national law enforcement institutions; and
2. Regional and sub-regional cooperation on implementation of the Convention.

Following broad discussions involving States Parties, Interpol, the World Health Organization and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), the Meeting of States Parties agreed on the value of States Parties:

- enacting laws and measures that penalize and prevent activities that breach any of the prohibitions of the Convention, include an effective system of export/import controls, and are sufficient for prosecuting prohibited activities
- promoting cooperation and coordination among domestic agencies, and clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of each;
- raising awareness of the Convention among all relevant stakeholders, including policy makers, the scientific community, industry, academia, media and the public in general, and improving dialogue and communication among them.
- ensuring effective enforcement of their legislative and regulatory measures, including through building capacity to collect evidence, to develop early-warning systems, to coordinate between relevant agencies, to train law-enforcement personnel, and to provide enforcement agencies with the necessary scientific and technological support.
- regularly reviewing their measures in light of scientific and technological developments, updating lists of agents and equipment, and implementing additional measures as required.

This year, under my chairmanship, the BWC States Parties are considering:

1. National, regional and international measures to improve biosafety and biosecurity, including laboratory safety and security of pathogens and toxins; and
2. Oversight, education, awareness raising, and adoption and/or development of codes of conduct with the aim of preventing misuse in the context of advances in bio-science and bio-technology research with the potential of use for purposes prohibited by the Convention.

The Meeting of Experts convened in Geneva from 18 to 22 August to begin work on these important topics, both of which go to the heart of improving effective national

implementation of the Convention. Participation in the meeting was impressively broad: 96 States Parties were represented, and just under 500 delegates participated in the meeting. Of these, around 180 were experts who had travelled from capitals. Importantly, participation from developing countries is increasing: 53% of the participating states were developing countries, up from 51% in 2007 and 48% in 2005. During the meeting, 20 detailed presentations were made by delegations of developing countries, more than double the number last year. This is an excellent result, and demonstrates both the wide relevance of the topics and the utility of the intersessional work program. I would also like to commend those States Parties which were able to sponsor the participation of others, a practice that I hope will expand in coming years.

The Meeting of Experts produced a wealth of material that we are still processing. The nature of the topics was such that many participants were from outside the usual sphere of multilateral arms control and non-proliferation. Improving biosafety and biosecurity requires input from the WHO, OIE, OECD, from the various regional biosafety associations and professional societies, and from commercial industry. Representatives of all these participated in the meeting. Similarly, progress on oversight, education, awareness-raising and codes of conduct requires the involvement and support of international, regional and national scientific bodies, professional associations, academia, commercial industry, and organizations such as UNESCO and the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST). Again, these were among the participants at the August meeting.

Among the many ideas and proposals that were discussed at the meeting, some common threads emerged. One clear theme that ran through both topics was that of balance: we heard repeatedly of the need for proportional measures, for carefully assessing risks, for balancing security concerns against the need for nurturing research and ensuring the peaceful development of biological science and technology. Another central theme was that of “no one size fits all”: no matter whether we are talking about standards for biosafety and biosecurity, or codes of conduct, it is clear that States Parties and other actors recognize that individual and local circumstances must be taken into account when addressing these issues. Other common threads included, on biosafety and biosecurity:

- A clear statement of what is meant by biosafety and biosecurity in the context of the BWC (and, by extension, in 1540-related activity);
- The importance of basing national efforts on existing guidance and standards, such as those provided by WHO, OIE, OECD and the regional biosafety associations;
- The need to involve all relevant stakeholders, including government, the scientific community, commercial industry and academia;
- The importance of aspects other than physical security, such as risk management, training, oversight, accreditation and licensing, accountability and information security;
- The need for building capacity of national public health, veterinary and agricultural services, including through strengthening laboratory infrastructure and technology, harmonizing regimes dealing with natural and deliberate threats, and providing necessary assistance; and

- The importance of actively engaging the private sector.

And on oversight, education, awareness-raising and codes of conduct, some of the major common threads were:

- Recognition that oversight should be a balanced combination of "top-down" government or institutional controls and "bottom-up" oversight by scientists themselves;
- The need to involve all relevant stakeholders in developing education and awareness-raising programmes;
- The importance of clearly explaining the risks involved, and providing practical guidance on the types of activities which could be misused in ways contrary to the BWC;
- The possibility of establishing formal requirements for non-proliferation education in relevant scientific and engineering training programmes;
- The need to encourage those working the biological sciences and related areas to take a more active role in addressing the threats posed by biological weapons, including by developing and adopting codes of conduct.

These common themes will be refined and developed over the next few weeks, and considered by the Meeting of States Parties to be held in Geneva from 1 to 5 December.

Next year, we will turn to capacity building in the fields of surveillance, detection, diagnosis, and containment of infectious diseases, and 2010 to the provision of assistance in the case of alleged use of biological or toxin weapons. Both those topics will again require coordination and integration with a range of different actors and agencies, illustrating once more that our task of confronting the risks posed by biological weapons is a shared one.

Mr. Chairman,

Another of the major outcomes of the Sixth Review Conference was the establishment of the Implementation Support Unit (ISU). The ISU is now in its second year of operation, and has been very well-received by States Parties. A small unit of only three full-time staff, it has performed with great efficiency its task of "helping States Parties help themselves". States Parties have benefited from a source of advice, coordination and communication, from greater cohesion to their activities, and from less reinventing of wheels. Other organizations and activities have benefited from the BWC at last having an institutional focus: a central point of communication and interaction. The ISU model has proved a success, and I would encourage States Parties to consider how it might be built upon and developed at the Seventh Review Conference and beyond.

We are also making progress in another of the key areas mandated by the Review Conference, that of universalization. I am pleased to report that seven new States Parties have joined the Convention since the Review Conference; four in 2007 and three so far this year. I understand that we may expect one or two additional accessions before the end of the year. The number of States Parties now stands at 162: a healthy total, but still considerably short of

the membership of the Chemical Weapons Convention or the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. States Parties to the Convention must continue to work hard to persuade the remaining 33 non-parties to join. In most cases, there is no political obstacle to accession: it is simply a matter of domestic priorities in the states concerned. We must do everything we can to move BWC accession higher on the national agendas of states not party.

Mr. Chairman,

In closing, I would note that the Meeting of States Parties this December will mark the half-way point of the intersessional work programme. We have made good progress, but much remains to be done. The threat posed to global security by biological weapons is constantly evolving with the rapid advances in biological science and technology, and the spread of these advances around the world. States Parties should begin to consider what other measures are needed to confront this evolving threat, and what steps they might take at the Seventh Review Conference in 2011 to ensure that the Biological Weapons Convention remains an effective barrier against the development or use of biological weapons.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
