Why join the Biological Weapons Convention?

Remarks by Ambassador Masood Khan, Chairman of the 2007 Meeting of States Parties of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC)

Geneva, 6 November 2007

Thank you very much for joining me for this lunch today, to discuss the Biological Weapons Convention. It is my pleasure to invite you in my capacity as Chairman of this year's BWC meetings. As Chairman, I have a formal mandate from the BWC States Parties to make contact with states not yet party, and to engage in dialogue which we hope will lead to universalisation of this important treaty. And I would like to emphasise that it is a *dialogue* that we hope to begin today. I would like to provide you with some information about the BWC and the advantages of membership, but I would also like to hear about your own positions and circumstances. Some of you represent countries which have signed but not yet ratified the BWC; others represent countries which have not signed. Some countries represented here may already be in the process of ratification or accession; others may have more pressing priorities, or may simply be unaware of the benefits of joining the regime. Whatever the case, I hope you will feel free to discuss your particular situation and concerns openly. My aim is to listen and understand, not to argue.

If you will allow me, I would like to begin by outlining why I believe the BWC is so important, why universal membership is essential, and what the benefits of joining for individual states might be. Then I would be most interested to hear your views, and we can discuss the various perspectives which I am sure will emerge.

The first consideration is the BWC's role in collective security, and as a forum for cooperation in meeting our international security obligations:

- The BWC is one of the three fundamental pillars of the international community's effort against weapons of mass destruction (along with the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and the Chemical Weapons Convention).

- Biological weapons can be used to attack humans, but also livestock and crops. The economic effects can be devastating. All states are potentially at risk, and all can benefit from joining the BWC.

- Compared to other weapons of mass destruction, biological weapons are relatively easy to develop, transfer and conceal. The struggle against them must therefore be shared across the international community, and needs to involve the security, scientific, public health and agricultural sectors.

- The BWC complements Security Council Resolution 1540: joining and implementing the BWC will help meet the requirements of SCR 1540.

- There is a growing risk that biological weapons may be obtained and used by non-state actors, including terrorist groups. Wider membership of the BWC will ensure there are fewer places where bioterrorists can work with impunity. Joining the BWC is a step all states can take to help reduce the threat of terrorism.

The second consideration is the role the BWC can play in strengthening our national public health, veterinary, agricultural and emergency-response capacities:

- The BWC supports the development of the peaceful uses of biological science and technology. Article X of the BWC requires States Parties to "facilitate, and have the right to participate in, the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information" for the use of biological agents and toxins for peaceful purposes.

- BWC States Parties meet regularly to advise and assist each other in developing their national capacities in such areas as disease surveillance, detection and diagnosis; biosafety and biosecurity; education, training and awareness-raising; emergency response; and legal, regulatory and administrative measures (such as licensing, registration, customs, law enforcement, transport).

- Bilateral or regional assistance and cooperation may be available under the BWC that is not available through other channels, or not available to non-parties.

The third consideration is the growing international consensus on universalising the BWC:

- Membership has increased from 155 to 159 States Parties in 2007. All the permanent members of the Security Council are States Parties, as the all the members of the European Union, all the former Soviet states, nearly all states in Latin America, and a large majority of states in Asia.

The fourth consideration is that joining the BWC is simple, free, and will lead to international recognition:

- There is no financial cost involved in joining the BWC, or any annual assessment for being a State Party. States Parties pay only a share the cost

of any meetings in which they participate (according to the UN scale of assessments).

- There is no waiting or qualification period to become a State Party, or special procedure required: the BWC comes into force as soon as your instrument of ratification/accession is deposited in London, Moscow or Washington.

- New States Parties will be formally welcomed at the annual Meeting of States Parties (10-14 December 2007), and their accession will be noted in the international security journals that report on these meetings, as well as in the wider media.

- The Implementation Support Unit can provide information and advice on sensitising policy makers in your country to the importance of the BWC and reasons for joining.

Finally, it is important to be aware that support is available to help with implementation of the BWC's obligations:

- Other States Parties, including in your region, are ready to assist with drafting or amending implementing legislation, establishing regulations, building administrative capacity, and other aspects of national implementation.

- Administrative support and advice on all aspects of accession and implementation is also available from the Implementation Support Unit.

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