

**Joint NGO Statement to Biological Weapons Convention
Meeting of States Parties
Geneva
5 December 2018**

Mr Chair, Distinguished Representatives:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. I speak to you on behalf of over 40 individuals and institutions. Individual NGO statements will be posted to the ISU website.

Mr Chair,

The NGO community plays an active role in universalization activities—as indicated in the Chair’s universalisation report—and we warmly welcome the ratification of the BWC by the Central African Republic and the accession of the State of Palestine and Niue to the Convention this year. The growing membership of the BWC is an important signal of the international community’s steadfast resolve to prohibit biological weapons. We also welcome the consensus resolution on the BWC in the First Committee last month. That, too, underscores the international community’s commitment to the norm against biological weapons.

Yet, the Convention is in a precarious state.

1. Most pressing is the critical financial situation. While many states parties are in arrears, it is only a handful of states parties—Brazil, Venezuela, Nigeria, Libya and Argentina—that account for more than three quarters of the overall debt. While all states parties should honour their financial commitments in a timely manner, the states parties with the largest debts have an added responsibility to settle their accounts without delay. The financial situation is already impacting this meeting, and it is putting the treaty’s future operation and the very existence of the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) at risk. The inactions of a few must not be allowed to jeopardise the efforts of the many, who do take their financial commitments to the BWC seriously. This meeting must take necessary measures to ensure financial predictability and sustainability of future BWC meetings and of the ISU.
2. A second challenge is the worrying trend that certain states parties take away valuable time from BWC meetings by making highly political statements that would be more appropriately addressed in other forums. We encourage all states parties to focus the meeting on the tasks at hand, and to work together to advance the aims of the BWC.
3. Over recent months, unsupported allegations of ‘secret laboratories developing biological weapons’ have intensified. These claims risk diminishing the taboo against biological weapons. They create uncertainty around the prohibition and undermine the BWC, and they may give the impression that biological weapons are worth pursuing, possibly even encouraging other nations to do so. If a state party has

genuine concerns about a biological weapons threat, there are existing mechanisms and precedent under Article V of the BWC to raise the issue. In the meantime, the international community must push back on unsupported allegations, and step up its efforts to actively devalue biological weapons as a military option.

4. Rapid developments in science and technology have for many years been an increasing cause for concern for the BWC. As the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs noted to the First Committee, these advances “have given rise to new concerns about the increasing likelihood of biological warfare.” The Secretary-General’s report on *‘Current developments in science and technology and their potential impact on international security and disarmament efforts’* highlights how, in the biological field, scientific advances that may be relevant to a range of activities across the biological weapons development spectrum—manipulating, growing, recovering, concentrating, stabilising, and testing—could undermine the norm against biological weapons. Obtaining accurate, up-to-date and systematic scientific advice is crucial for the BWC. Engaging with scientists and other technical experts ensures that scientific advances relevant to the Convention are better understood. This engagement also serves to promulgate the norm against biological weapons to new generations of scientists.

Technical experts from the NGO community have played significant roles in analysing S&T advances, their implications for the BWC and options for governance, in support of efforts by the UN and individual states. In advance of this meeting, NGO community members organised the first Annual Global Forum on Scientific Advances Important to the BWC, and today, at a side event, NGO community members launched a report on *Governance of Dual Use Research in the Life Sciences: Advancing Global Consensus on Research Oversight*. We support efforts: to develop appropriate governance mechanisms; to further develop and promulgate principles for codes of conduct for life scientists, that build upon the IAP Statement on Biosecurity and complement The Hague Ethical Guidelines developed and endorsed by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW); and to develop active learning systems to engage life scientists in support of codes of conduct, responsible science and the BWC. At a side event tomorrow, NGO community members will host a side event on evolving biosecurity education and engaging scientists.

5. Although the BWC has been in existence now for over 45 years, there is still no agreement on how to operationalize Article VII. We are encouraged by the progress made at the August MX4 meeting, but strongly encourage states to take meaningful concrete steps towards adopting a process for Requests for Assistance. The NGO community will continue to provide research and model forms to assist in this process.

Finally, Mr Chair, while challenges to the treaty are substantial, let us not lose sight of the substantive discussions that were held at the MXs this year and of the comprehensive summary reports produced by the Chairs. While these reports are valuable, appropriate actions now need to be identified. The NGO community stands ready to cooperate with you to support and strengthen the BWC.

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