

Statement on Biological Weapons
UN General Assembly First Committee
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Mr Chair, Distinguished Representatives,

COVID-19 has crystallised the deep and wide impacts of biological threats. The pandemic has also demonstrated the importance of preparedness and response-coordination across the international community, regardless of whether a biological event is natural, accidental or deliberate in origin. Going forward, structures and mechanisms for responding to biological threats will require significant rethinking by the international community.

Mr Chair,

First Committee delegations must, first and foremost, uphold the norm against biological weapons and the misuse of the life sciences. Advances in science and technology that potentially enable more readily accessible, more destructive and increasingly targeted biological weapons continue at pace. Unequivocally reaffirming commitments to the 1925 Geneva Protocol and the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) is more important than ever. Implementing these treaties in national legislation is equally critical.

Mr Chair,

States party to the BWC have a responsibility to nurture and grow the treaty regime. Ensuring that it functions properly and keeps up with an evolving world requires proper and sustained funding, substantive meeting outcomes, and better incorporation of stakeholder groups. It also requires strengthening information-sharing, confidence-building, consultation and clarification procedures, and transparency. A dedicated technical body is also essential to monitor relevant scientific and technological developments, to consider their potential bearings on the BWC, and to formulate individual and collective action to address possible challenges.

Mr Chair,

In light of the COVID-19 experience, First Committee delegations must seriously consider how to make the broader biological disarmament architecture more fit for purpose in today's world. Key elements would be:

- An international coordinating body, ideally UN-based, to monitor and inspect high-containment facilities and high-risk biological activities.
- Action plans, and subsequent implementation plans, to strengthen national, regional and international capacities for early identification, response and mitigation of disease outbreaks.
- An international body, at the nexus between public health and security and ideally UN-based, with a mandate to investigate suspected outbreaks of international concern as soon as initial reports emerge, and regardless of any indications of it being natural, accidental or deliberate.
- A standing coordinating capacity, ideally UN-based, to conduct independent, in-depth investigations of suspected bioweapons use.
- A framework to coordinate an international response following the use of biological weapons.

There are already proposals like these on the table by states and civil society for how to creatively evolve the biological disarmament architecture to uphold its central role in preventing the misuse of biology for hostile purposes. First Committee delegations must give these proposals the serious and constructive consideration they deserve.

Thank you for your attention.