

**Joint NGO Statement**  
**Biological Weapons Convention Meeting of States Parties**  
**11 – 13 December 2023**

Mr Chair, Distinguished Representatives:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. I am speaking on behalf of 13 organisations and 37 individual experts.

Mr Chair,

We welcome the agreement on a final Review Conference document and on the ambitious intersessional programme of work for 2023-26. A stronger Review Conference document would have included an article-by-article review and a final declaration, as well as a substantive outcome from the 2017-2020 intersessional programme. However, the consensus that was reached shows that action is still possible despite the challenging international security environment. Commitment and dialogue still matter, and concerted, collaborative efforts can strengthen regimes and introduce new ideas and new diplomatic approaches.

It is our hope that the momentum generated by the Review Conference can be put to good use over the next several years as the new Working Group on strengthening the BWC gets to work.

To progress **international cooperation and assistance** under Article X of the BWC, we call on states parties to:

- Establish an International Cooperation and Assistance Committee comprised not only of experts from states parties, but also from civil society and international, regional, and national organisations. The Committee should assess, monitor and offer guidance on international cooperation and assistance challenges for high-risk biological threats relevant to the BWC, as well as offer recommendations during emergencies on strategies to counter such threats.
- Make greater use of the ISU-administered Article X database to facilitate assistance requests and offers.
- Reinforce and coordinate global expert networks to collectively counter potential biological threats in collaboration with all states parties.
- Strengthen collaborative capacities between states parties and civil society to formulate comprehensive, cross-sectoral action plans. These plans could provide guidance for the identification and development of international cooperation and assistance projects, programmes and initiatives of relevance to the Convention.
- Take advantage of the catalogue of civil society activities in support of Article X.
- Fully operationalise Article VII—including through increased recognition of the importance of international cooperation activities (Article X) in the effective operationalisation of assistance and protection measures (Article VII).

In its August meeting, the Working Group illustrated common ground on a comprehensive ongoing mechanism to assess **scientific and technological developments relevant to the BWC**. This remains a core task for states parties and is one that can see meaningful progress over the coming years. With this in mind, we call on states parties to:

- Develop a consensus position on an S&T review mechanism that includes:
  - Appropriate terms of reference articulating the necessity of periodic review of S&T developments, including associated benefits and risks to the Convention and the global prohibitive norm against biological weapons.
  - Representative membership and forward-looking working methods, including the review of S&T advances in the context of monitoring, investigation, and other systems that can increase confidence that biological activities are only being conducted for peaceful purposes.
  - Additional staffing and resources to ensure the mechanism's sustainability in the long term, beginning with an ISU Science Officer with a mandate and associated resources to support the scientific review process.

We welcome efforts by the InterAcademy Partnership to simulate and evaluate an S&T review process and we encourage states parties to make use of the findings in their deliberations.

- Develop and share model approaches to national science policy that enable states parties to effectively raise awareness of the security dimensions of life sciences research, promote research integrity and the responsible use of science, enhance accountability practices among practitioners, and foster access to emerging capabilities for peaceful purposes.
- Continue to undertake and further develop ongoing information exchange, cooperation and collaboration with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, including its Technical Secretariat and Scientific Advisory Board, to respond to the implications of the growing convergence of the chemical and life sciences.
- Identify convergent domains of scientific endeavor that require incorporation into future S&T reviews, such as artificial intelligence and neuroscience.
- Explore how BWC and CWC states parties and organisations can work together more effectively to prevent hostile application of mid-spectrum agents, including naturally occurring toxins, bioregulators and their synthetic analogues, as well as associated delivery systems.

We urge states parties to consider these action items as the basis for a proactive agenda for next year's working group sessions, to ensure consensus and develop a plan of action for an S&T review mechanism before the next review conference.

Mr Chair,

The full and effective **national implementation of the Convention** requires concerted action across multiple lines of effort. In the first instance, these include the adoption of measures towards: criminalising biological weapons activities and adoption of appropriate penalties; putting in place and enforcing national export and import controls for related materials; establishing frameworks for institutional biosafety and biosecurity to ensure the physical protection of life science infrastructure and biological risk management in any activities

involving biological agents and toxins; and building capacity within competent authorities at the national level to prevent, detect, prepare for and respond to biological threats. We encourage states parties to report their BWC implementing legislation in their Confidence-Building Measures (CBM) submissions.

We welcome efforts by UNIDIR and VERTIC to establish a BWC National Implementation Measures Database. We encourage states parties to make use of this Database—and to contribute additional information, as appropriate—as a tool designed for information-sharing on national implementation approaches, while demonstrating commitment to BWC obligations and promoting trust, transparency and cooperation in relation to the BWC.

We urge all states parties to adopt, implement, review and update their policy, legal, regulatory, and institutional frameworks for biosafety and biosecurity to ensure that these keep up with advances in science and technology and provide a solid foundation for biorisk management. We welcome national initiatives that aim to foster a culture of safe, secure and responsible work in the life sciences, including measures to increase biosafety and biosecurity awareness among professionals, strengthen the governance of dual-use life sciences research, and promote the development of synergies between health, science and security sectors to maximise knowledge-sharing among relevant stakeholders—all with the principal aim of ensuring the broadest use of the life science for peaceful purposes.

Mr Chair,

**Transparency and information-sharing** help mitigate ambiguity and uncertainty. This reassures and builds confidence in compliance. Over time, it should reduce the risk of concern and, ultimately, conflict.

To this end, we welcome the increased participation in the CBM mechanism, particularly over the past several years, and it is important to build on that momentum. But there are also opportunities to increase the value of CBMs. States parties should revisit the content of the CBM forms to ensure that they accurately reflect today's biological threats and capabilities and that they remain fit for purpose. The use of CBM data should be expanded, by making more CBM submissions publicly available and by providing the ISU with the mandate and resources to conduct CBM content analysis. The e-CBM platform can also be improved to further streamline the submission process, to increase use of electronic submissions, and to implement search functionality for CBM submissions. We encourage states parties that participate in CBMs to share their experiences, including the direct benefits they derive from participating, and continue to provide support for states parties that have not submitted recent CBMs.

While CBMs are the primary transparency mechanism under the BWC, many other options exist, including peer review and site visits, and we urge states parties to continue exploring these possibilities.

The Working Group presents the first opportunity in over two decades for states parties to formally discuss **verification**. We urge states parties to establish a common understanding of verification, compliance assessment, and related concepts in the BWC context to facilitate

concrete progress on these issues. For example: Is verification about detecting non-compliance and investigating possible violations? Or is it more about supporting national implementation and compliance, providing quality assurance, increasing transparency, and deterring non-compliance? Without a common understanding or definition, states parties risk talking past each other and setting themselves up for failure from the outset.

Verification is important to many states parties, and all states parties need to be willing and engaged in making progress across all of the issues on the table. We urge states parties to constructively focus their discussion on preparing for and developing a concrete plan for negotiating verification during the next intersessional period.

Confidence-building and verification are closely related, but treating them as the same issue risks not making progress on either. We believe there are opportunities to take concrete steps forward on both fronts, and we urge states parties to consider and develop opportunities, in whatever form, to incrementally strengthen the Convention.

Finally, Mr Chair, we would like to address allegations of non-compliance. Baseless non-compliance claims risk weakening the BWC. They not only erode confidence in BWC compliance, but also in essential public and animal health infrastructure, and they significantly undermine global biosafety and biosecurity efforts. Framing development assistance as a form of non-compliance with the BWC seriously hinders development aid and cooperation efforts on peaceful biological research under Article X of the BWC. We urge all states parties to provide swift and strong rebuttals of unfounded non-compliance claims in this forum.

We thank you for your attention.

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