

Biological Weapons Convention, Ninth Review Conference, 28 November – 16 December 2022

28.11.2022

General Debate

Statement Austria

Mr. President,

At the outset please allow me to congratulate you on your assumption of the presidency of the 9th Review Conference of the Biological Weapons Convention. You can be assured of the full support of our delegation as you guide us over the coming weeks.

We align ourselves with the statement delivered by the European Union. In our national capacity we wish to add some further remarks.

Adopted 50 years ago the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) has created a strong taboo against the use of biological agents and toxins as weapons. It is our task at this Review Conference to uphold and strengthen this global norm against the development, production, stockpiling and use of biological agents and toxins as weapons. The BWC was also the first international instrument banning an entire category of weapons of mass destruction, an achievement that cannot be underestimated. It lies in the very nature of weapons of mass destruction to threaten humanity due to their indiscriminatory and uncontrollable effects.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us about the possible scale and impact of any deliberate or accidental use of biological agents as well as their irreversible effects on human life and our shared environment. While the broad definition and the general purpose criterion applied in this convention continue to be an effective tool, the pandemic was an urgent reminder that we need to use this Review Conference to further strengthen our capabilities and the Convention's implementation.

With 184 States Parties including six new States since the 8th Review Conference universalization is moving slowly but steadily towards our shared goal of global adherence. Austria urges all the remaining States to join us in this endeavour.

Mr. President,

At the same time institutional weaknesses in this instrument remain and it is our common obligation to address them during this Review Conference. They concern the way national implementation is conducted, our abilities to follow new developments and of course the means to verify compliance with the convention.

We currently witness rapid technological developments within the life sciences, accelerated in convergence with other new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence. At the same time technological barriers are increasingly lowered through information and communication technology. As a result, security challenges surrounding biological weapons are increasingly complex. We need to keep the BWC responsive to the challenges of our time.

Therefore, Austria fully supports measures to improve the responsiveness of the BWC. The benefits and the general need for a Scientific Review Mechanism have been deliberated for several years. Our current discussions centre on questions of modalities and participation. We believe that these questions can be answered in the coming three weeks and that such a mechanism is ripe for

adoption. In light of the developments described and recent experiences we cannot afford to stay blind.

In addition, we need to build in-house capacities and a general structure to support all the tasks mandated at this Conference. Austria is therefore in strong favour of the creation of a Science & Technology Officer within the ISU and a general strengthening of the renewed mandate. We also support increased cooperation with other relevant stakeholders, such as the science community relevant international organizations such as the WHO or FAO.

Mr. President,

Today's situation resembles the 1990s when the Third Review Conference set out to discuss means to verify compliance and the related capabilities of our convention. Austria considers verification a central element of all multilateral disarmament regimes and we stand ready to discuss the design and purpose of such an instrument for the BWC. We aspire for a strong commitment in this regard during this Review Conference and an ambitious intersessional period. With this in mind we decided to co-sponsor the working paper of Canada and the Netherlands concerning the establishment of a Temporary Experts Working Group.

Aside from such a decision we believe that the Review Conference needs to permanently delegate decision-making competencies to Annual Meetings of States Parties in order to secure an agile and flexible handling of the BWC.

Mr. President,

In 2022 Article V and Article VI were invoked for the second and first time respectively in the history of the BWC. The lessons learned from the practical application of these processes are once again that we require strengthened capabilities within the BWC. At the same time, we need to underline that the Russian disinformation campaign related to biological weapons and the unfounded claims in this regard are very worrisome and undermine the lawful and important cooperation between States as foreseen under Article X of the convention.

Austria also stand in full support of the UN Secretary-General's Mechanism (UNSGM) as the only existing international independent mechanism for the investigation of alleged uses of biological weapons.

We support discussion for the further and equally important implementation of Article X and Article VII. The importance of bio-security and bio-safety and the need for international cooperation in these fields is currently more evident than ever. We are also in favour of measures to further promote national implementation and compliance as well as confidence-building. We welcome the growing number of CBMs submitted and hope that this trend will continue in following years with the help of the ISU and more up-to-date submission systems.

Mr. President,

The coming weeks provide a rare opportunity to strengthen the Convention and its implementation, to advance cooperation and to strengthen global preparedness against threats in the field of biological agents and toxins. Austria stands ready to constructively engage in this endeavour and is strongly committed to achieve a successful conclusion of this Conference with concrete outcomes.