Opening Statement of the Netherlands

delivered by

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at the

Ninth Review Conference of the Convention on the
Prohibition of the Development, Production and
Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin
Weapons and on their Destruction

Geneva, 28 November 2022
Mr. President,

Allow me to congratulate you, Ambassador Bencini, on your election as President of the Ninth Review Conference and may I also compliment you on the thorough preparations for this conference.

Mr. President,

In addition to the EU statement, the Netherlands would like to make the following remarks in its national capacity.

“We live in extraordinary times” seems to have become a mantra of sorts recently. We have experienced a once-in-a-century pandemic that has laid bare our shared vulnerabilities as well as the urgent need for closer cooperation to deal with bio-risks. The disparities in pandemic response have also served as a reminder for us all to continue to strive for health equity, both domestically as well as globally.

Mr. President,

Extraordinary times instil in us an extraordinary sense of responsibility. A responsibility to strengthen and improve the BTWC, one of the pillars of the global disarmament and non-proliferation architecture. Hence, I would like to raise three issues.

**First: on Cooperation and Assistance under Art. X**

The Netherlands attaches great importance to cooperation and assistance for peaceful purposes. We are one of the largest donors to the WHO and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI). Through our National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM), we are also actively involved in collaborative projects in Southeast and Eastern Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia. These programs are aimed at strengthening biosafety and security capacities, improving national implementation, and mitigating risks associated with dual-use research. An excellent example of such efforts is a joint project with Sri Lanka to implement a National Inventory of Dangerous Pathogens (NIDP).
If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is that diseases do not stop at borders and bio-risks are of concern to us all. Therefore, we remain open to collaborate on projects and initiatives that increase health security, biosafety or biosecurity under the BTWC.

**Second: on Science and Technology (S&T)**

Rapid advances in science and technology (S&T) offer exciting opportunities, but also increase the potential for dual-use research to be subverted for nefarious purposes. In the past review cycle, there was broad agreement among States Parties that the Convention should keep pace with scientific and technological developments. This requires the constructive and structural engagement of experts. Therefore, the Netherlands supports the establishment of a board of scientists and experts to review S&T developments that may have an impact on the BTWC.

**Third: on Verification**

It is time we make headway on the issue of verification. The rapid advances in S&T necessitate fresh ideas that do justice to the increasing complexities of the biotech industry and the evolving threat, but also take advantage of developments in verification techniques. We stand ready to further explore the issue of verification during the coming intersessional period. Meanwhile, existing measures that build confidence, strengthen national implementation, and enhance compliance should be implemented and strengthened. This can be achieved through confidence building measures, knowledge exchange, transparency exercises, and peer reviews, but also by further operationalizing the Art. V consultation procedure for different use cases.

The Netherlands notes that Russia has invoked article V and VI as part of a campaign to spread unjustified and unfounded claims, among others, about the alleged development of biological weapons in Ukraine. This took place during Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, which we condemn in the strongest possible terms. Having said this, the invocation of Articles V and VI by Russia has not only underlined the relevance of these provisions, it has also demonstrated the international community’s ability to distinguish between fact and fiction.

Mr. President,
Discussions about cooperation, S&T, and verification aren’t new and a number of proposals have been tabled over the years. Yet, progress on these themes was hampered by a longstanding political deadlock. In order to overcome this, Canada and the Netherlands have proposed the establishment of an inclusive temporary expert working group to evaluate concrete measures to strengthen the BTWC on all these topics and report its findings to the Meeting of States Parties (MSP) for further action. Such a working group can function as a vehicle for shaping a productive and inclusive intersessional process and we invite all States Parties to contribute to further refining this proposal.

Mr. President,

The ISU plays a crucial role in ensuring the smooth implementation of the BTWC. However, it is critically underfunded and understaffed. For that reason, the RevCon should not only renew its mandate but also increase the budget so that it may continue to take on vital tasks in support of the Convention.

Finally, Mr. President, the Netherlands continues to draw attention to the fact that women and girls face different, and sometimes greater, risks when faced with biological accidents or weapons use, yet remain underrepresented in arms control and disarmament diplomacy. The application of a gender lens in our work as well as equitable gender representation are therefore necessary conditions for the effective implementation of the BTWC.

Thank you.