



Biological Weapons Convention – 9th Review Conference
AUSTRALIAN GENERAL DEBATE STATEMENT
28 November 2022

Thank-you President.

Let me begin by congratulating you on your confirmation as President of this Conference earlier today. I would also like to thank you for all the work that you and your team have done in preparing us for this meeting, and to extend our gratitude to the ISU for their ongoing support for our work as well.

The BWC has established a strong norm against biological weapons, and with almost universal membership, it is a pillar of the multilateral disarmament regime. Upholding this norm is critical to international peace and security, and it is in all of our interests that we work to strengthen the Convention and advance our shared goal of universalisation.

This Review Conference comes at a critical time - for the BWC and for the international community's response to biological threats more broadly. The COVID-19 pandemic has focused the world's attention on biological threats – whether natural, accidental or deliberate – and has shown the devastating consequences that such threats can have. The contemporary biosecurity landscape looks very different to that of even a decade ago. The remarkable advances we have witnessed in the biological sciences over recent years present both opportunities and challenges for our work under this Convention.

In this context, it is more important than ever that we ensure the BWC is fit for purpose. That it can adapt to the evolving biological threat environment and take account of relevant developments in science and technology; that is implemented fully and complied with; and that is institutionally strengthened and adequately funded.

To achieve this, we must seize the opportunity this Review Conference presents to break the stalemate of the last two decades and agree a way forward that will enable us to make tangible progress on all of these elements.

President

Australia believes that there are some decisions we can take now on concrete proposals that will strengthen the Convention in the shorter term. Some of the initiatives coming out of the intersessional program are well advanced and have garnered sufficiently broad support for us to make tangible progress at this Review Conference, including on: bolstering the Implementation Support Unit; further operationalising assistance under Article VII; and progressing a mechanism for reviewing advances in science and technology

We must also look anew at how we fund our work, including through a possible voluntary fund for technical cooperation. Pursuing a more agile decision-making model must also be a priority. Given the pace of developments in the biological sciences, it is simply not tenable to wait out five-year review cycles for key decisions. The very clear solution to this is to devolve some decision-making to the annual Meetings of States Parties.

Looking further ahead, we need to address the more complex challenges facing the Convention, including how we build confidence in compliance and strengthen implementation over the longer term. The critical decision we need to make at this Review Conference is how we take this work forward.

Australia takes the view that we need to do so in an inclusive, structured and comprehensive way. We must enable the depth of discussion required given the complexity of the issues involved, but do so with a clear timeframe in mind and a determination to make tangible progress. This is why Australia has co-sponsored and strongly supports the joint proposal by Canada and The Netherlands on the establishment of an Expert Working Group. We think this represents the best model for advancing our work and bringing the BWC into the 21st Century.

We also think it is important to consider the gender dimensions of our work and we are pleased that this issue is attracting increasing attention within the BWC - both in terms of levels of participation, as well as through exploring gendered impacts and analysis. We welcome Panama's leadership and UNIDIR's helpful contributions in this regard, and encourage all states to consider concrete, practical steps we can take to advance gender considerations under the BWC.

President

Australia is committed to making concrete and meaningful progress on strengthening the BWC at this Review Conference. We encourage all States Parties to work cooperatively and creatively to this end. The international community expects us to do so and the times demand it. We are in good hands under your leadership and I assure you of my delegation's full support as you guide us through the coming weeks.

Thank you President.