Statement on the occasion of the
Ninth Review Conference of the Biological Weapons Convention

Mr President, excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies & gentlemen,

Review conferences are the only regular opportunities open to States Parties to move forward international arrangements against the weaponization of the life sciences and biotechnology. They are a valuable and rare resource and have been used to reach additional agreements on what the treaty is intended to do, how those objectives can be turned into action and to make commitments on what actions they will take collectively and individually. They also allow States Parties to build new capabilities, such as the creation of the Confidence Building Measures or the Implementation Support Unit. The rest of the world cannot afford for those of you present here to do anything but seize every opportunity and take urgent action to strengthen this treaty.

Biosecure believes that agreement, commitment, action, and new capabilities are urgently needed in five areas:

1. Cyberbiosecurity

Cyber-biosecurity is an emerging multidisciplinary field that combines cybersecurity, biosecurity and cyber-physical security as relates to biological systems. With the increasing digitisation of the life sciences comes a number of significant security concerns relating to the field of biosecurity. The vulnerabilities inherent in networked biological data systems—including pathogen databases and other sensitive information, laboratory equipment, engineering controls and facility security—could be manipulated to endanger the health and lives of humans, animals and plants from tampering with critical manufacturing cyber-physical systems; hacking and manipulating biological supply chains, to the unwitting manipulation of dangerous pathogens and beyond.

We need to better understand what and where the risks are as the cyber and biological sciences further converge. Biosecure has stood at the forefront of efforts to recognise and respond to cyberbiosecurity vulnerabilities and remain at the disposal of States Parties to work together to identify risks, develop mitigation strategies and build awareness amongst the scientific and technological communities.

2. Reviewing developments in science and technology

For decades, among States Parties, and within the broader BWC community, there has been broad recognition that the treaty struggles to keep pace with advances in science and technology. There is widespread agreement that new capabilities are needed. Past review conferences have failed to act and the gap between ‘what is’ and ‘what is needed’ grows ever larger. Five years ago, there was consensus (if not universal agreement) to create a science advisory board for this treaty. It did not happen. You must take action now. Relevant advances are happening even more frequently, and come from more places, and from increasingly diverse disciplines and communities. The implications for the BWC continues to
grow and cuts across every article of this treaty. You cannot let another five years pass before establishing a standing body to review these developments and to explore how they are affecting the aims and operation of this important international instrument. Biosecure has a long track record in identifying relevant developments and mapping the implications for this treaty. We stand ready to work closely with whatever procedures and practices on which you decide.

3. Education and awareness raising

States Parties better engaging with science and technology is only half of the solution. It is critical the scientists and engineers generating knowledge and creating new capabilities relevant to the BWC are aware of its provisions. This goes beyond understanding that there is an international prohibition on the acquisition and use of biological weapons. It necessitates scientists and engineers, young and old, to think about, and be able to consider, the broader implications of their work. Too often this awareness, and associated training, is not a core part of how we teach biological science and engineering. Much more is needed. Biosecure has played its part. We have developed and run the world’s largest online training courses in biosecurity. We urge States Parties, at this review conference, to build on past initiatives, to bring together the individual threads held by those of us working in these spaces, and to provide the forum and resources to weave an international tapestry capable of providing the reach, resources, and incentives necessary to make real progress.

4. Compliance assessment

Global events since the last review conference have demonstrated the critical importance of capabilities to differentiate between unnatural and unusual disease events, between allegation and action, and between compliance and non-compliance with the aims of this treaty. Biosecure has been pleased to see action taken on building relevant capabilities in other forums. It is now the turn of the BWC. It is almost 30 years since States Parties collectively explored the scientific and technical aspects of these challenges. The report of that meeting was written on a typewriter. Much has changed. Both new challenges and opportunities exist. We have been glad to be involved with non-governmental efforts to begin to explore what might be accomplished using modern biotechnology. We are aware that discussions have already started in some parts of the world to consider how these tools might be combined to build confidence in compliance and to identify possible cases of activities inconsistent with obligations under the BWC. Biosecure is pleased to announce that it will be facilitating such a discussion in Africa, for Africa, in 2023. We believe that it is time for the States Parties to collectively return to consider these issues and encourage you to establish a suitable intersessional framework to explore contemporary compliance.

5. Victim assistance

While the BWC was born of the arms control treaty era, its aim is purely humanitarian—“for the sake of all [hu]mankind, to exclude completely the possibility of bacteriological (biological) agents and toxins being used as weapons”. We have seen the devastation wrought by infectious disease—and we know that the potential for new or enhanced biological weapons is rising ever higher. It is now time to discuss how we might learn from the humanitarian disarmament movement to help victims should the worse come to pass. We cannot stand idly by until it is too late.

Mr. President, excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies & gentlemen,
What you do in this room over the next three weeks has implications for millions of people not present. Your successes keep them safe and prevent suffering. Your failures have wider implications, the shockwaves of which will continue long after the press releases are published. Perhaps more now, than at any other time since this treaty entered into force, there is a real risk of the widespread use of biological weapons. While you work in this room, and others like it, to agree an outcome from this meeting, it will be vital to remember that failure is not an option, deliberate disease is repugnant to the conscience of humankind, and that you must spare no effort to help build is all a better future.