Statement by Canada to the Ninth Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC)

Distinguished Chair, Excellencies, Colleagues,

Canada welcomes your leadership, Mr. Chairman, and assures you of its full cooperation. We have much work to do, and we are confident that you will guide us with skill and wisdom.

Mr. Chairman, I will not reiterate the challenges we confront or the consequences of continued inaction by States Parties to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC). We are all acutely aware of the severe and diverse biological threats that we face. No further evidence or words are required. What is needed now is clear and decisive action.

In this regard, Canada calls on this Review Conference to pursue an agenda of realistic ambition. This means recognizing that while we will not be in a position to resolve all of the Convention’s challenges in the next three weeks, we can and must make meaningful progress to pave the way for ongoing, incremental advances in the years ahead.

Canada sees three specific areas where such progress is entirely within reach. First, we must strengthen the BTWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU). Specifically, we call on States Parties to recognize the extraordinary contributions made by the unreasonably lean ISU, and better equip and support it to deliver the critical mandate entrusted to it. Second, we must re-empower the silent majority of States Parties that have been marginalized for the past twenty years, and that have seen their aspirations for this Convention frustrated by a vocal minority. Cross-regional efforts, such as the Global Partnership’s Signature Initiative to Mitigate Biological Threats in Africa, demonstrate the potential for and power of collective will. Finally, we must improve the BTWC’s existing tools, such as Confidence Building Measures and Article VII Provisions.

As important as “what” must be done, is “how” to do it. Indeed, as we look back on twenty years of near paralysis in the BTWC, the principle problem has not been a shortage of promising proposals, but rather inability to reach consensus on how to translate ideas into actions. A fundamental stumbling block has been that, for some, the only way forward has been to go back; to return to a process that faltered and a document that, at its apex, still contained 400 sets of bracketed text. In Canada’s assessment, it is pointless to seek to change the past and to believe that only there can we find the solutions to combat future biological weapons threats. Rather, we must focus on the present and work together to chart a new course forward.

It is in this context that Canada and the Netherlands have tabled a proposal calling for the Establishment of a Temporary Experts Working Group by this Review Conference. This proposal, which has been co-sponsored by 27 countries, recognizes that extraordinary advances in biological science and technology and evolving biological weapons threats require new approaches and a new commitment to strengthen the BTWC. We are confident that the proposed Experts Working Group could contribute to this critical objective, by establishing a forum for States Parties to consider measures to: i) build confidence and enhance transparency; ii) address concerns about compliance; iii) enhance bio-risk management and prevent bioterrorism; and iv) enhance international cooperation and assistance.
Canada’s confidence in the viability and potential impact of such an Experts Working Group is grounded in our experience with another action-oriented group that has made real progress on these very same issues: the G7-led Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction (GP). For more than two decades now, the 31-member Global Partnership has been at the forefront of international efforts to prevent, detect and respond to biological weapons threats. As detailed in a working paper on the International Activities of Global Partnership Member Countries related to Article X of the BTWC, which Canada will introduce next week, the GP continues to consistently, cohesively and qualitatively support efforts to strengthen the full and effective implementation of the BTWC.

BTWC States Parties should be inspired and encouraged by the achievements of the Global Partnership. And we must condemn in the strongest terms the disinformation activities targeting threat reduction measures conducted by GP members in Ukraine. The past months have seen repeated attempts by the Russian Federation to manipulate the BTWC, in an effort to justify its illegal and unjustifiable invasion of Ukraine. Canada is pleased that Russia’s blatantly false narrative was soundly rejected at the Article V Consultation in September, and that the invocation of Article VI was rebuffed at the United Nations Security Council. That said, we remain seriously concerned about the impacts of Russia’s disinformation on the integrity of the Convention and cooperation under Article X.

Mr. Chairman, in closing let me underscore that this Convention – the foundation of the bioweapons non-proliferation regime – is at a tipping point. In the face of colossal and ever-evolving biological threats, it is not an option for the BTWC to remain a toothless time capsule. As such, those of us gathered here for this 9th Review Conference must reject the deficient status quo and together put in place practical and meaningful measures to better enable the Convention to fulfill its critical potential. We have all heard the saying that “Nero fiddled while Rome burned,” a clear indictment of inaction and irresponsibility in the face of crisis. This is our chance to avoid a similar historical condemnation. Let us act collectively and intentionally to change the BTWC narrative by setting the world on a course to a safer and more secure future.