Research Group for
Biological Arms Control

Statement by the

Research Group for Biological Arms Control

Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker Centre for Science and Peace Research at the University of Hamburg, Germany

to the Seventh Review Conference of the States Parties to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention

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Mr. President, Distinguished Representatives, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by thanking you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I make this statement on behalf of the Research Group for Biological Arms Control at the Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker Centre for Science and Peace Research at the University of Hamburg in Germany. The mission of our Research Group is to contribute through innovative research and outreach activities to the universal prevention of biological weapons development, production and use.

We have come here with great expectations. We would like to see the BWC coming out of this important conference a stronger, more reliable treaty, having been set on a steady path towards comprehensiveness and modernization. I am sure everyone in this room supports this. But what would make the BWC stronger, more reliable, comprehensive and modern?

Over the past 10 years, the focus of international discussions on biological arms control has been on countering bioterrorism. The BWC proceedings have contributed to reducing the bioterrorism threat by improving national legislation, science oversight, scientists' awareness of the misuse potential of their research, and early warning about disease outbreaks. But ... the main task of the BWC is something different: It is to prevent states from using their biotechnological capabilities to develop weapons – now, tomorrow and in the distant future. While relatively little concern about the development of biological weapons by states exists at the moment, this could change in the future. Some might be happy to leave implementation of the biological weapons prohibition to individual states, with little scrutiny at the international level. However, if technological developments, new security assessments and changed threat perceptions make biological weapons attractive for states at a later point in time, this approach might come back to haunt us.

Therefore, we believe that the BWC most urgently needs a mechanism to assess compliance. And again, almost everyone in this room agrees. Verification of compliance with the BWC is, however, more complicated than for other arms control and disarmament treaties. Because of the dual-use character of most of the activities in biotechnology and the life sciences, verification is not about counting pieces of equipment or measuring the amounts of certain agents present in certain places. Instead, what needs to be clarified is intent: That is, the reason why certain pieces of equipment or amounts of agents are present and the ends for which they are being used. Verification in the biological arms control area can therefore not be expected to provide 'yes or no' results for compliance assessments, except in the most severe cases of treaty violation. What must and can be aimed for is increasing or maintaining confidence in compliance. A functioning verification mechanism for the BWC will enable us to move from little confidence in compliance towards more confidence in compliance in relation to an increasing number of states.

Arguably, three elements are essential in a compliance assessment mechanism for the BWC. First, the most important element of such a mechanism would be the continuous reaffirmation through information monitoring that existing capabilities and capacities are not being used to develop biological weapons. The CBMs are one important source of treaty-relevant information that is already in existence. Our Research Group aims to support the improvement of the CBM mechanism by annually analysing the CBM submissions that have been released to the public. The latest analysis – our 2011 CBM Reader on Publicly Available CBMs – is available at the door. Besides the CBMs, there is a wealth of relevant open source data that should be used for information monitoring purposes. Our group has, for instance, suggested to monitor trade data globally in order to aid compliance assessment. Monitoring trade data could also contribute to better implementation of Article X. We will present this concept in detail during a lunchtime seminar on Friday this week.

Second, the BWC is in need of a reliable challenge investigation mechanism to address serious allegations of biological weapons use and development. It would be highly desirable to better connect the UN Secretary-General's mechanism for the investigation of CBW use with the BWC. A third indispensable component of a verification mechanism for the BWC is a 'mid-level element', something between the politically charged challenge investigations and day-to-day information monitoring activities. Such an element already exists in the form of the consultative mechanism under Article V of the BWC. In order to fulfil its mid-level function effectively, the consultative mechanism should be kept as flexible as possible, while simultaneously improving reporting to BWC states parties on any consultations, meetings and visits.

We are in the fortunate position that the initial components of all three verification elements are already in existence. If they are further developed and used judiciously in a modular approach, the BWC would become much more robust in the years to come.

I thank you for your attention!