

Take responsibility for global biosecurity

Statement of Pax Christi International to the Seventh Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC), 5-22 December 2011, Geneva

Mr. President, Excellencies,
Distinguished Representatives,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Pax Christi International is a Catholic Peace Movement inspired by Catholic Social Teaching. We call upon all people of good will to do anything in their power to contribute to global peace and justice in general and biosecurity in particular. Pax Christi would like to remind the international community gathered here today that it has the “responsibility to protect” (R2P) the security of all people. In relation to biosecurity, the lives of substantial numbers of people may be at risk not only through the spread of diseases and toxins harmful to human beings, but also through attacks aimed at livestock and food supplies. By applying the “responsibility to protect” to biosecurity, all these threats will be encompassed. The international community should take all possible precautions to prevent states or terrorist groups or individuals from obtaining or using such weapons. The Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention is the main instrument of international law to achieve this protection. The States Parties to this convention are urged to take into account the following recommendations in their deliberations during this year’s Seventh Review Conference.

Universality

All States should sign and ratify the BTWC, prohibiting the possession or development of biological and toxin weapons. States Parties who have not yet implemented the Convention in their national legislation are encouraged to do so. States Parties are urged to take more emphatic steps than hitherto to encourage other States to join the Convention.

The Intersessional Process

The Intersessional Process of annual meetings of experts and States Parties started in 2003 and was continued in 2006. These meetings have offered a platform for international debate on particular topics aimed at strengthening the Convention and have contributed to awareness of legal requirements and moral obligations among the life science community. In the next Intersessional Process, preparing for the Eighth Review Conference, Pax Christi International supports continuation of annual meetings of experts and of States Parties. Proposals to install standing thematic expert groups should also be implemented. In addition, because of the rapid pace of progress in life sciences and technologies, there should be greater flexibility in putting issues on the agenda of Annual Meetings. Annual Meetings of States Parties should be authorised to make decisions on the basis of consensus and as appropriate.

Confidence-Building Measures

Confidence-Building Measures were agreed by the Second Review Conference (1986) "in order to prevent or reduce the occurrence of ambiguities, doubts and suspicions and in order to improve

international co-operation in the field of peaceful biological activities". Less than half of all 164 States Parties have submitted annual CBMs until now (maximum 72 in 2010). Pax Christi International urges all States Parties who have not done so to submit CBMs for 2011 and all States Parties to continue submitting CBMs in the future. Pax Christi International also recommends that States Parties agree to amend the CBMs at the Seventh Review Conference to reflect developments since they were last amended at the Third Review Conference in 1991.

Science and technology

Pax Christi supports the moves to establish a body of scientists and policy makers entrusted with continuous monitoring of relevant scientific and technological progress. (e.g. Nixdorff, 2011). Such a proposed permanent monitoring body for relevant progress in science and technology should report its findings periodically for collective review by the Annual Meetings of States Parties to the BTWC.

The Implementation Support Unit

The mandate of the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) installed at the Sixth Review Conference, should be renewed and extended after evaluation at the Seventh Review Conference in December 2011. Its strength should be increased appropriately.

International cooperation and assistance

Pax Christi International welcomes initiatives for international cooperation and assistance that contribute to saving lives and minimising suffering. In addition, Pax Christi International pleads for more efforts by the international community in providing clean drinking water, sanitation and food security also to the poorest people in the least developed countries. The key principles guiding relevant initiatives should be human dignity and human security. Recognition that natural and deliberately caused disease outbreaks both merit the same response is essential. Any investment in preparing for response to potential future outbreaks should not be to the detriment of essential investment in basic public health, clean water and sanitation, and a healthy living environment for all. It is more urgent to save lives actually at risk today than to save lives which have a modest but not insignificant chance to be threatened at some undefined point in the future. Censorship should be avoided in public communication about disease outbreaks. Freedom of the press should be guaranteed in order to prevent information becoming public too late, with unnecessary victims as a result. It is critically important to have the knowledge about the epidemiological situation of all countries in order to both establish the correct sanitary and health policies and outbreak surveillance (as this is the key to differentiating natural from deliberate outbreaks). Furthermore it is important that States and individuals guilty of hostile use of biological or toxin weapons are brought to Justice. Should an outbreak be determined to be deliberate then additional responses will be appropriate and the UN Security Council should be involved.

Compliance and verification

The States Parties to this Convention should agree on a mechanism to provide increased confidence in compliance. For Pax Christi, the preferred route towards such a compliance regime would be through a standing working group examining how best to demonstrate compliance leading to adoption of a regime

following the Eighth Review Conference supported by the establishment of an independent Organization for the Prohibition of Biological Weapons (OPBW). In considering how best to achieve such a compliance regime, the standing working group should bear in mind the experience of the CWC regime supported by the OPCW.

During the Seventh Review Conference, a reasonable ambition is to make progress towards an effective compliance regime. The international community will lose credibility if it fails to do so, as it needs to be seen to be addressing its responsibility for ensuring that global life sciences are not misused.

Thank you for your attention. Pax Christi International wishes you all fruitful discussions and a successful Review Conference.

Geneva, December 2011