



ICRC

**Seventh Review Conference of the States Parties
to the
Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and
Stockpiling
of
Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons
and on their Destruction**

5 – 22 December 2011

Geneva, Switzerland

**Statement of the
International Committee of the Red Cross**

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has for nearly a decade promoted a broad-based approach to preventing the hostile uses of biology, an approach we have often referred to as a "web of prevention". In the current context of rapid developments in the life sciences and a multiplicity of actors with access to sensitive agents it is only such a broad-based approach that will serve the Convention's purpose "to exclude completely the possibility of biological agents and toxins being used as weapons." We welcome the fact that much of the work of States Parties over the past years has reflected just such an approach. At this point we would like to highlight ongoing work within the ICRC in the field of victim assistance, a topic that was the subject of discussion at the 2010 Meeting of Experts and States Parties, and to make three proposals for the work of this Conference.

Since 2010 the ICRC has begun to develop a capacity to mount a response in the event of the use, threat of use or alleged use of nuclear, radiological biological or chemical (NRBC) weapons. The three objectives of such a response are: first, to assure the health, safety and security of ICRC personnel and others to whom ICRC has a duty of care; second, to permit the continued presence and activities of the ICRC in a suspected or actual contaminated environment; and third to assist the affected victims. The main pillars of this response involve: identifying a systematic management process including timely decision making; establishing standard operating practices in fields like medical assistance, decontamination and self-protection; and creating the capacity to undertake realistic, thematic and regional NRBC-related risk assessments.

There are three areas the ICRC would like to highlight where decisions of this Review Conference can strengthen the Convention and contribute to building an effective "web of prevention" against the hostile use of biological agents and toxins.

Firstly, the Convention needs an **improved means to review scientific and technological developments**. Continuing advances in the life sciences, widespread access to biotechnologies and the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of scientific research present both opportunities and challenges for the Convention.

These advances provide the opportunity for more robust defenses against the deliberate spread of disease, for example through improved medical countermeasures, detection and decontamination technologies and microbial forensics techniques. But these developments also present serious challenges. They can make poisoning and the deliberate spread of disease easier, more lethal, and more difficult to detect. They also complicate the task of ensuring compliance with the Convention.

The Sixth Review Conference reaffirmed that the Convention is comprehensive in its scope and that Article I "applies to all scientific and technological developments in the life sciences and in other fields of science relevant to the Convention." But this recognition itself is not enough. The Convention needs to establish a mechanism to ensure regular and structured review and to assess developments in science and technology so that the benefits to the Convention can be maximized and the risks minimized. This Review Conference provides an opportunity that must be seized to agree on such a mechanism.

Secondly, there is a need for States Parties to **increase their efforts to educate life scientists**. As the ICRC emphasized in its "Biotechnology, Weapons and Humanity" initiative launched in 2002, all relevant parts of the scientific community and industry must be involved if preventive efforts are to be effective. This requires a continuous effort and a

broad understanding of the risks, the rules of national and international law, and the responsibilities of scientists to prevent the hostile use of their research.

During the past 10 years there has been a welcome increase in the interaction between the Convention's work program and scientific organizations, associations and industry. A range of efforts to engage the scientific community have also been undertaken by individuals, organizations and governments. However, there is still a widespread lack of awareness among scientists of their legal and ethical responsibilities.

There is, therefore, a clear need to ensure that all universities offering curricula in the life sciences include at least one mandatory session that covers the risks, the rules of national and international law and the responsibilities of scientists. This Review Conference could call for the establishment of such a requirement by all States Parties at the national level.

Thirdly, this Review Conference presents an opportunity to re-focus attention on the core issue of **monitoring and assessing compliance with the Convention**, which has not been discussed as part of the annual meetings. Although there has been justifiable emphasis in recent years on the risk of non-state actors using biological weapons, history shows that States have been the most adept at harnessing the life sciences for hostile purposes. We must not lose sight of the need for ensuring that the Convention has the means necessary for States Parties to adequately monitor and assess compliance.

In the interests of greater transparency it is also important to strengthen the annual exchange of data between States in the framework of the Convention's "confidence building measures". This Review Conference should agree on an agenda for a future process of annual meetings through which States Parties will address monitoring and compliance challenges and strengthen the scope and implementation of the Convention's confidence building measures.

In conclusion, it is important to recall the ultimate objective of the Convention stated in its preamble, namely "to exclude completely the possibility of biological agents and toxins being used as weapons." A centerpiece of this Review Conference should therefore be an unambiguous reaffirmation in the final declaration of the obligation of States Parties to respect, and ensure respect for, the absolute prohibition of biological weapons. The Biological Weapons Convention is the central pillar in preventive efforts that now involve a wide range of different communities. It is the best basis for ensuring that knowledge of life processes is solely used for the benefit of humanity.