High Representative Izumi Nakamitsu
Message to the Biological Weapons Convention Meeting of States Parties

Delivered by Ms. Anja Kaspersen, Chief of Geneva Branch, Office for Disarmament Affairs

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Geneva, Switzerland
Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to send my greetings to the 2017 Meeting of States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention.

Allow me to congratulate Ambassador Amandeep Singh Gill on his election as Chairman of the Meeting of States Parties. I wish you well in your efforts this week to reach consensus on a substantive outcome of the Meeting of States Parties. You can be assured of the full support of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs in your task. I would also like to echo Ambassador Gill’s welcome to Samoa as the 179th State Party to the Convention.

It is widely known that the BWC was the first international treaty to effectively prohibit an entire class of weapons of mass destruction. It is not only a main pillar of disarmament and international security, it also contributes to strengthening national public health, veterinary, agricultural and emergency-response capacities.

The large participation at this Meeting from States, international and regional organizations, civil society and private industry demonstrates the importance the BWC plays for the international community as a whole. The security challenges posed by biological threats are becoming increasingly more complex, and I encourage you to take full opportunity to further discuss the problems and explore potential solutions during the course of this week.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The BWC is no longer only a strictly security-focused instrument. It has moved with the times. In recent years, dramatic advances have been made in the biological sciences and applicable technology. The benefits and risks posed by such advances are similar to those posed by other emerging technologies that are changing the international security landscape and as such they deserve careful monitoring.

In recent years there have been repeated warnings from the international scientific community that developments in science and technology, such as gene-editing, as well as the
broad dissemination of knowledge enabled by information and communication technology, have lowered the technological barriers to acquiring and using biological weapons.

The UN system is already attempting to deal with some of these innovations across various forums. Secretary-General Guterres has repeatedly expressed his concerns about what he calls “frontier issues”, which include weaponisation of AI based technologies, lethal autonomous weapon systems, cyberattacks and developments in biotechnology, and has tasked the UN system with developing strategies for how it can best help “we the peoples” of the UN Charter to address them. The BWC has a role to play in this response.

Normative considerations must keep pace with technological developments. However, it is equally important that once norms are developed they are fully implemented. In this regard, in both its regulatory and promotional aspects, the BWC has been found lacking. The BWC requires implementation at the national level. Although relevant data is not collected on a systematic basis, the findings of the Security Council resolution 1540 comprehensive review and the low rate of submissions of BWC Confidence-Building Measures suggest that implementation is not where it should be.

There is also a lack of concrete activities to promote the peaceful uses of biology. In this regard, it is important to consider the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and their relevance to the BWC. While there is a clear relationship to Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, there are also links to Goal 3 on good health and well-being, Goal 4 on quality education, Goal 9 on industry, innovation and infrastructure and Goal 17 on partnerships. The SDG technology facilitation mechanism could inform the implementation of Article X of the BWC. As with other areas of work of the United Nations, the SDGs provide a new lens through which to view disarmament, including the BWC.

Some progress was made at the Eighth Review Conference was with respect to preparedness and response to a possible biological attack. However, it is still not clear how or through what mechanisms States Parties would react and respond. We have no institution or coordination mechanism to protect us. The Review Conference decided that the United Nations could play a coordinating role, but went no further in identifying which parts of the UN should be involved, or defining what such a role could entail. There is still much work to be done to define how States parties would respond to any attack, including coordination between States, with international organisations including the UN and the World Health
Organization, and between health and security sectors. The Ebola response showed the importance of international coordination, and while much work has been done since then to remedy the gaps identified, there has been little focus on the additional challenges that would be encountered if an outbreak was caused deliberately.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The BWC, like other treaties, is currently facing severe financial shortcomings caused by systemic and structural weaknesses of the current funding arrangements, made more difficult by the outstanding arrears or late payments by a number of States Parties. The Depositary Governments officially expressed their concerns on this matter earlier this year and I would like to join my voice to theirs and urge all States Parties to fulfil their financial obligations and take this opportunity to discuss how best to resolve the problems we currently face and collectively identify a path forward to restore the financial resilience of the Convention.

Because the Convention is important to all of us, we need to urgently address issues that impact on its functioning. Given the disappointing outcome of the Eighth Review Conference last year, I hope therefore, that this Meeting of States Parties, under the able chairmanship of Ambassador Gill, will make progress in reaching consensus on a substantive intersessional programme for the coming years.

Allow me to conclude by wishing you all a successful Meeting. I believe that with the support of its States Parties and the wider community, the BWC will remain one of the cornerstones of the international community’s efforts against weapons of mass destruction.

Thank you all for your attention.