Statement of the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs
Izumi Nakamitsu to the 2018 Meeting of States Parties
to the Biological Weapons Convention

Delivered by

Anja Kaspersen, Director
UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, Geneva Branch

Geneva
3 December 2018
Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to deliver remarks, on behalf of the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, to the 2018 Meeting of States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention.

I congratulate Mr. Ljupco Jivan Gjorgjinski on assuming the chairmanship of the Meeting. I wish you well in your efforts this week to reach consensus on a substantive outcome from the Meeting. You can be assured of the full support of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs in your task.

I also take this opportunity to acknowledge the leadership of the Chairs of the five Meetings of Experts which met here in August – Ambassador Maria Tereasa Almojuela of the Philippines, Mr Pedro Dalcero of Brazil, Ambassador Julio Herráiz of Spain, Mr. Daniel Nord of Sweden and Mr Otokar Gorgol of the Czech Republic. Under their leadership, the Meetings of Experts conducted a thorough and interactive review of the topics under consideration and set a good foundation for the intersessional programme for 2019 and 2020.

The BWC was the first international treaty to effectively prohibit an entire class of weapons of mass destruction. It is not only a pillar of disarmament and international security, but also contributes to strengthening global health security. The BWC’s growing membership, quite unusual for a treaty of its age, is testament to its continuing relevance to all States Parties whatever their level of development.

The BWC represents the codification of the norm against biological warfare. Today, the very idea of the deliberate use of disease as a weapon is universally
regarded as repugnant and illegitimate. No country professes to possess biological weapons or to require them for national security.

The world is witnessing incredible advances in science and technology, particularly in the area of biology. Almost every week, the media carries stories about new applications for genome editing or synthetic biology. As has been emphasized on many occasions, particularly by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, such advances will bring significant benefits for humanity in areas such as public health, food security and climate change. These advances will also be critical in progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Promoting the peaceful uses of biology is a critical element of the Convention’s implementation.

As the Secretary-General acknowledged in his disarmament agenda, there remains a vast potential to operationally link the implementation of disarmament objectives with many of the Sustainable Development Goals. For example, activities in relation to SDG3 on good health and wellbeing, can directly contribute to implementation of the BWC. By recognizing and exploiting these linkages, we can strengthen both national public health systems and preparedness for tackling the deliberate use of disease as a weapon.

However, as was also flagged in the disarmament agenda, and as was acknowledged many times during the Meetings of Experts here in August, these advances also pose challenges from a security perspective. Developments in science and technology lower the barriers to the acquisition, access and use of biological weapons, including by non-State actors. At the same time, the international instruments that we have at our disposal were not designed to maintain vigilance over such fast-moving fields of science and technology, which involve a multitude of different actors. While you have made strides in this respect in the framework of the BWC in recent years, there is much more
that we can do collectively to ensure that these critical normative frameworks keep pace with advances in science and technology.

Although its strong norm against biological warfare is being adhered to by a growing number of States Parties, we must admit that the BWC is institutionally weak when compared to similar regimes. National implementation is uneven and the Convention contains no operational capacity to respond to biological attacks or provisions to verify compliance with the Convention.

For the BWC to function properly, it must rest on a sound and sustainable financial footing. I therefore commend the efforts of Mr Gjorgjinski to prepare a comprehensive information paper. I welcome the concrete proposals to ensure the financial sustainability and predictability of the Convention in the context of this Meeting’s mandate to manage the intersessional programme.

The Office for Disarmament Affairs has been involved in these efforts from the outset. Allow me therefore to take this opportunity to recall two guiding principles established by the General Assembly, which I hope will inform your deliberations on how to address the financial shortcomings. First, I wish to recall that extra-budgetary activities cannot result in any financial liability for the Organization. Second, States Parties must pay their assessed contributions on time and in full in order to be assured of the availability of meetings and implementation support services.

The Office for Disarmament Affairs stands ready to support any decision that you will take this week to ensure the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of the Convention.

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.