High Representative for Disarmament Affairs

Second International Conference

“Global Biosecurity Challenges: Problems and Solutions”

Sochi
20 June 2019
Deputy Foreign Minister Mr. Ryabkov,

Deputy Director Mr. Smolensky,

Distinguished participants,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to address this Second International Conference on Global Biosecurity Challenges: Problems and Solutions. I would like to express my thanks to the Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation for jointly organizing this important event.

I commend the Russian Federation for its efforts to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) and its strong support for the Convention. As one of the three Depository Governments, the organization of this conference demonstrates your continued commitment to the BWC. The presence here today of so many experts is evidence of the important role the BWC plays for its States Parties and indeed for the entire international community. The security challenges posed by biological threats are becoming increasingly complex, and I am grateful to the Russian Federation for providing this opportunity to further discuss the problems and explore potential solutions in a setting conducive for multilateral dialogue.

The First International Conference on Global Biosecurity Challenges, held here in Sochi in 2017, contributed to the adoption of the current BWC intersessional work programme. The joint statement by the three Depositary Governments and their subsequent joint working paper demonstrated the value of international cooperation and dialogue. I hope that this “Sochi spirit” can once again contribute positively to the success of the Convention.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The BWC’s growing membership, quite unusual for a treaty of its age, is testament to its continuing relevance to all States Parties.

It is not only a pillar of disarmament and international security, but also contributes to strengthening global health security. In his agenda for disarmament launched in Geneva last
year, Secretary-General Guterres highlighted the need to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention, focusing on its specific role as a forum for the consideration of preventative measures, such as strong national health systems, robust response capacities and effective counter-measures. Such tools are also integral to countries’ defenses against naturally-occurring diseases. Effective implementation of the BWC therefore has synergies with the implementation and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Strong public health systems are necessary to prevent and combat naturally-occurring diseases, but they are also an effective deterrent against the development of biological weapons, and the first line of defense if, God forbid, such weapons are used.

The BWC codifies the long-standing norm against biological warfare which itself rests on the deeply-held human aversion to the use of disease as a weapon. Today, the very idea of the deliberate use of disease is universally regarded as morally repugnant and politically illegitimate. No country professes to possess biological weapons or to require them for national security. However, this does not mean that the risks of an attack using biological material can be ignored, or that they may not return. Recent epidemics clearly demonstrate the humanitarian and health consequences that a naturally-occurring biological pathogen can unleash. A deliberately-released pathogen could cause more human suffering than even a naturally-caused epidemic. Yet there is no commensurate institutional structure to prevent or respond to such an eventuality. Despite this, as it has been repeatedly stated, the institutional investment in this area is lower than that in nuclear, chemical or radiological response mechanisms.

In recent years, we have also seen frequent evidence that other actors, including terrorist organizations, and groups or individuals with malicious intent, have an interest in acquiring weapons of mass destruction, including biological weapons. These cases demonstrate that we cannot lower our guard. Given the speed at which a pathogen could spread in our modern, interconnected world, all States need to maintain vigilance, and all States should be adequately prepared to respond to disease outbreaks, whether natural or deliberate.

This need is made more urgent by recent developments in science and technology. As with many other “frontier technologies”, the universal benefits of such advances unfortunately come with potential risks of misuse. New techniques, such as gene-editing, as well as the broader dissemination of knowledge, have lowered the technological barriers to acquiring and
using biological weapons. Advances in biological science and applicable technology must continue to be carefully monitored within the framework of the BWC, along with related convergent technologies, for example in the digital realm.

Efforts to maintain and deepen our relations with the scientific and technological community must be improved. Scientists and technologists should be seen as our partners in the struggle against weapons of mass destruction, as they were during the Cold War. Today, it is vital that the diplomatic and scientific communities work together to tackle our common challenges, particularly to ensure that security concerns do not hamper beneficial scientific advances and their application for the good of humanity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This conference provides a useful vantage point from which to address the state of affairs of the BWC regime. On the eve of its 45th anniversary, the Convention is now a pillar of the international peace and security architecture.

However, the regime also stands at the halfway point of the current intersessional programme. A few weeks from now in Geneva, many of you will gather together again for the Meetings of Experts. Last year’s meetings were detailed, intense and constructive. I sincerely hope that the same will be true of this year’s meetings, which will discuss issues at the heart of global biosecurity.

Your deliberations in a few weeks’ time in Geneva must be results-focused and build upon the good discussions of last year. They should work towards promoting common understandings and taking effective action. Specific and concrete activities and initiatives have been proposed, and on several there already appears to be a degree of convergence among States Parties.

In 2018, significant and important headway was made on financial issues. Unfortunately, the Meeting of States Parties was unable to acknowledge and take forward the substantive work of the Meetings of Experts. I hope this year’s Meeting of States Parties will be able to do so. This year’s Meeting serves as an important bridge between last year, and the one to take place next year, when attention will be much more clearly focused on the Ninth Review Conference.
I therefore wish Ambassador Yann Hwang success in his role as Chair of the 2019 Meeting of States Parties and I reiterate that the Office for Disarmament Affairs, through the BWC Implementation Support Unit, will continue to provide all necessary support to States Parties. As he stressed in his disarmament agenda, the Secretary-General remains committed to the effective implementation of the BWC.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased that a session at this conference will be devoted to the Ninth Review Conference. It is never too early to begin planning for such important events. Procedurally, the arrangements for the Review Conference in 2021 need to be endorsed by the Meeting of States Parties in December this year. For prudent planning, particularly financial and logistical aspects, these arrangements must be confirmed as far in advance as possible.

Substantively, the Review Conference will be a key landmark in the evolution of the BWC regime towards its 50th anniversary. The Review Conference is mandated to review the operation of the Convention, so it will, I hope, carefully examine and take action upon the work of the Meetings of Experts in 2018, 2019 and 2020. The Review Conference is also mandated to take into account relevant new scientific and technological developments. Clearly, there have been many such developments since the last Review Conference in 2016 and it will be important that the Review Conference is properly equipped to consider and take action upon such developments.

To be able to successfully achieve these objectives, the Review Conference needs to be properly prepared for and this conference provides a fine starting point for these preparations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to conclude by wishing you all a successful Conference. The BWC is one of the most important pillars of the international community’s collective efforts against weapons of mass destruction and it is my firm belief that we have a collective responsibility to provide it with the utmost support.

Thank you for your attention.