



Statement by H.E. Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič,
Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International
Organizations in Geneva

Biological Weapons Convention – 8th Review Conference
7 November 2016

Mr. President,

At the outset, Ambassador Molnár, allow me to congratulate you on your election as President of this 8th Review Conference of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). The Holy See Delegation offers you its full support for a successful and effective outcome.

The BWC was the first multilateral treaty to ban a whole category of weapons of mass destruction. By stigmatizing biological weapons the BWC managed to create a clear international norm which must be continually strengthened.

We are confronted today with unprecedented complexity in the international security system: breakthroughs in life sciences are posing increasingly difficult challenges to the implementation of the BWC; traditional and non-traditional security threats are more and more intertwined; the threat of the illegal acquisition, production and use of biological agents by terrorists is increasing; the frequent spread of pandemics threatens global health and security.

Mr. President,

The Holy See Delegation would like to add its voice to address the most important issues on the agenda, especially those relevant to the effectiveness of the Convention.

The BWC is an essential pillar of international disarmament and security and its Preamble affirms that the use of biological weapons “would be repugnant to the conscience of mankind and that no effort should be spared to minimize this risk”. Using life to indiscriminately destroy life, using science to spread death instead of curing diseases and alleviating suffering, is contrary to human dignity.

The very nature and purpose of the BWC framework offers a chance to underline and understand the direct link between disarmament and development, and their mutually reinforcing relationship. The right to participate in the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information about the use of bacteriological agents

and toxins for peaceful purposes is set out in Article X of the BWC, with the understanding that safety, security and non-proliferation are an essential part of the equation. In this regard, an effective implementation of Art. X could also serve as a good incentive for the universalization of the membership of the BWC.

The recent naturally occurring outbreaks of diseases are an example of the relationship between disarmament and development: they highlight the limitations of the national and international response. We know how quickly these outbreaks can spread across borders and how vulnerable public health systems are, especially in the poorest countries; a response that would likely be even more difficult and strained in the case of an intentional use of biological weapons, especially if it occurred during an armed conflict.

For these reasons, it is important that State Parties continue and strengthen support for capacity-building in States Parties in need of assistance through international cooperation, while coordinating and creating synergies with international and regional organizations and stakeholders. Given their very nature, diseases do not respect borders, so it is in everyone's interest that our neighbors can rely on robust national health systems. In this regard, development is truly another name for peace and justice.

Additionally, the lack of an institutional mechanism for assistance under the BWC must be reassessed: there is a need for clear procedures when submitting requests for assistance or when responding to a case of alleged use of biological or toxin weapons. This is of the utmost importance, considering that there are no specific direct provisions for the victims of such attacks.

Advances in science and technology and international cooperation and assistance are strictly interconnected and lie at the very heart of the BWC. As we witness more remarkable breakthroughs in life sciences through more sophisticated genetic engineering and synthetic biology, the BWC finds itself operating within a rapidly changing scientific and technological context. These advances bring positive opportunities for peaceful uses, for new treatments and cures for diseases or for improvements to the environment; but the same knowledge and equipment can be too easily diverted for hostile purposes. Because of this dual-use nature, a systematic and periodic review of science and technology in relation with the BWC is needed if we want to avoid seeing our Convention become irrelevant.

In this regard, education plays a crucial role in addressing the issue of misuse at its roots. National codes of conduct and ethical training should be developed and respected. All stakeholders should join forces: scientists, universities, industries, government, and international agencies should all together feel responsible for the use of biotechnology to promote life and an integral human development. As Pope Francis reminds us: “...*we need constantly to rethink the goals, effects, overall context and ethical limits of this human activity, which is a form of power involving considerable risks.*” (Laudato Si’, 131)

Capabilities to produce biological weapons are accessible to a wider range of actors, as is witnessed in the growth of “do-it-yourself biology” and “garage labs”. No State alone can win the war against the proliferation of biological weapons. The efforts to prevent non-State actors from acquiring, producing or using chemical and biological weapons require a collective will and joint action in the fields of safety and biosecurity, as well as increased international cooperation and assistance and strengthened capacity-building.

Finally, the Holy See Delegation wishes to express its appreciation for the dedication and good work of the ISU. The ISU should be strengthened, in particular through the addition of technical expertise concerning crucial aspects of the BWC: namely, international assistance and cooperation and the Science and Technology review process.

Mr. President,

Disarmament and non-proliferation instruments are only as successful as State Parties’ commitment to implement them. Today’s complacency is tomorrow’s catastrophe. The Holy See wishes success to this 8th Review Conference, through our common commitment to protecting our people from the real risks we are facing in the field of biology.

Thank you, Mr. President!