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**Civil society preparations for the Seventh BWC Review Conference
("BWPP Online Discussions")**

How do we ensure global accountability of biodefence activities?

This paper is based on the views expressed by Kirk C. Bansak, Chandré Gould, and Victoria Sutton during the BWPP online discussion on the topic of "How do we ensure global accountability of biodefence activities?", available at www.bwpp.org/revcon-biodefenceactivities.html.

If states are not held accountable for their biodefence activities, the norm against biological weapons could be undermined in two ways, both owing to the dual-use nature of the life sciences:

- Biodefence activities could cross the threshold of peaceful intent into the realm of offensive applications.
- Biodefence activities could be perceived from the outside as offensively oriented, threatening to prompt other countries to pursue their own biological weapons programmes.

These risks mean that biodefence programmes must, without exception, be subjected to effective accountability measures that accomplish two objectives:

- Ensuring that the peaceful intent of biodefence programmes is preserved.
- Demonstrating the peaceful intent of biodefence programmes to the rest of the world.

National oversight or regulatory systems are necessary for accomplishing the first objective. However, there could be financial and political hurdles to success. Firstly, such systems could be resource-intensive, and the capacities for such systems may not be immediately available. Moreover, there is a possibility that oversight authorities might accept national security demands as justification for allowing questionable or prohibited activities.

The institution of international transparency of biodefence programmes is necessary for accomplishing the second objective. However, there are obstacles on this front as well. While

states that are committed to nonproliferation and disarmament of biological weapons will be willing to voluntarily share information about their biodefence activities, states that pose actual proliferation threats will be more hesitant or unwilling to do so.

Despite these challenges, there are possibilities for achieving biodefence accountability on both the national and international level through the combination of well-designed approaches:

1. ***Instituting mandatory codes of conduct and practice for national biodefence programmes.*** Such codes would help biodefence scientists distinguish between defensive and offensive work, understand their obligations under the BWC, and create a mechanism for reporting BWC violations.
2. ***Establishing better information sharing procedures between States Parties to the BWC.*** This would include: (a) increasing the amount of information shared on biodefence activities; (b) developing more formalized processes for mutual sharing of such information; (c) granting access to biodefence facilities; (d) developing options for addressing outstanding questions through consultations in accordance with Article V of the BWC; and (e) improving the current system of confidence building measures.
3. ***Creating an international mechanism and culture of transparency that encourage and protect whistleblowers.*** Illegal weapons programmes are not monolithic wholes; they are composed of individual people with personal interests and motivations. The proper incentives and protections can encourage such individuals to come forward. Defectors and intelligence sources have been in the past and will continue to be vital to uncovering treaty violations.
4. ***Addressing the topic of biodefence transparency during the next intersessional work programme.*** Achieving effective biodefence transparency is one component of the larger issue of strengthening compliance with the BWC. Compliance enhancement and assessment have been politically contentious in recent years as a result of the failure to negotiate a verification protocol, but States Parties have shown interest in making progress on the compliance front from other directions. Enhanced transparency has been identified as one way forward, and the next intersessional process could offer an important opportunity to solidify transparency concepts and practices.
5. ***Implementing cost-effective measures as the starting point to achieving both national oversight and international transparency.*** Initiating the pursuit of global accountability of biodefence activities through the most cost-effective measures can (a) enable governments to balance their priorities; and (b) enable the development of stronger, common understandings of biosecurity in the process. One such measure would be the implementation of an online registration system for biodefence facilities that would foster the development of a network for communication, training, resource sharing, and capacity building.

The building and strengthening of biodefence capabilities will continue to be an important component of global biological risk management. However, to ensure that the risks of biodefence activities do not undercut their benefits, appropriate measures must be undertaken to ensure biodefence accountability. Appropriate accountability measures do not undermine biodefence research and development. In fact, they can lead to important windfalls, such as the creation of international biodefence networks capable of leveraging joint development and sharing of resources to achieve more rapid biodefence progress.