

**Statement to the UN General Assembly First Committee
on Disarmament and International Security
New York
12 October 2016**

Delivered by Kathryn Millett
on behalf of the Global Civil Society Coalition for the Biological Weapons Convention

Mr. Chair,

Disease, especially deliberate disease, poses a major risk to international security, whether directed at humans, animals, or plants. Public health emergencies connected to Ebola and Zika virus have illustrated how far we have to go before we are sufficiently prepared to overcome challenges in global health security. The human, economic, social and political costs of natural, accidental, and deliberate disease can be immense: the World Bank estimated \$7 billion USD was spent on fighting Ebola, which ultimately infected approximately 28,000 people and caused 11,000 deaths. It is clear that disease can decimate countries, derail development, stigmatize thousands, and cause longer-term health issues. The effects of Ebola will undeniably be with us for decades.

If we are struggling to deal with natural disease, the possibility that such incidents might be accidentally or deliberately instigated is a pressing concern for the international community. Indeed, in February this year the World Economic Forum named biological weapons as one of the top three technologies that will negatively transform warfare. International efforts are yet to find an effective way to balance the benefits of modern biotechnology against their potential for misuse.

This year, the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) - a cornerstone of international humanitarian law and the first disarmament treaty to ban an entire class of weapons – will undertake its Eighth Review Conference. The BWC is the lynchpin of global efforts to ensure that disease or toxins are never used as a weapon. During the conference, States Parties will assess the status of the convention and should agree on effective means to better improve the fight against the use of these universally condemned and abhorrent weapons.

To date, the Convention has given us much to celebrate. The accession of Angola in July this year brings global membership to almost 90%, with a total of 175 States Parties. No state has used biological weapons since its entry into force in 1975; no country openly possesses biological weapons; and no state views them as a legitimate national security tool. The norm against the development and use of these weapons remains strong and continues to grow with each new State Party.

There remain, however, serious challenges to this norm and to the treaty, and we can neither afford to be complacent nor fail to make full use of the opportunity presented by the Eighth Review Conference to ensure that the Biological Weapons Convention meets the needs and challenges of the modern world.

First, it is crucial to recognize that the threat posed by the malign use of the life sciences has evolved since the last Review Conference in 2011. The international scientific community has repeatedly warned that developments in science and technology have lowered every technological barrier to acquiring and using biological weapons. In addition, biotechnology know-how and equipment diffuse ever more widely – a trend set to continue and expand dramatically in the coming years as the bio-economy grows. The BWC must be capable of keeping abreast of new developments, advances and applications in life sciences. It must also respond to them appropriately and effectively, minimizing risks through effective action and by taking advantage of their benefits in pursuit of the treaty's objectives. This is an issue with which States Parties should be familiar - there have been *ad hoc*

discussions on instituting a regular science and technology review process since the last Review Conference. It is now time for action. We believe that the Review Conference must establish a process for more systematic advice for BWC States Parties on science and technology and, further, that this process should be transparent and as inclusive as possible with an active role played by non-governmental bodies including industry and academia.

Second, there is a pressing need for States to ensure that the interval between Review Conferences is used more effectively and productively. The intersessional process has become stagnant with fewer gains each year and increasing numbers of States are frustrated at being unable to take decisions or pursue effective action. We believe a useful way forward would be to restructure this process by replacing the annual BWC Meeting of Experts with specific Working Groups or processes on key issues and so focus States Parties' efforts on the most pressing areas. We have further outlined some options in an additional paper available outside the room and online at <http://www.bwpp.org/documents.html>. Regardless of how States decide to reshape the intersessional work programme, the Review Conference must seize this opportunity to restructure the process in a way that allows the treaty to adapt to effectively address contemporary health security issues. Simply maintaining the ineffective status quo is unacceptable and may signal the start of a slide into irrelevance for the BWC.

Third, States Parties must reexamine and improve how they deal with compliance with the Convention. With no verification system, the BWC relies on a raft of disparate and ineffective compliance tools. States should start afresh on this issue. States Parties should establish a process to explore the efficacy of the different approaches already tabled and trialed by some of their number. States Parties should explore how they can demonstrate their compliance to one another within an acceptable framework of accountability, using agreed procedures to clarify and resolve any compliance concerns, in as transparent a manner as possible.

Fourth, we believe that more resources are needed to support work that is necessary to fulfill the Convention's objectives, undertaken both by the treaty's Implementation Support Unit (ISU) and by supporting partners. There will be nominal costs in establishing a science and technology review process and revising the intersessional work programme. States should not shy away from meeting these incremental costs which would significantly enhance the effectiveness of the regime and which would constitute a far smaller sum than the international community already invests in mitigating the threats posed by other weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, the treaty's Implementation Support Unit struggles to accomplish its remit on existing resources. Establishing new processes will increase this burden further. The ISU should be provided with adequate human, financial, and administrative resources necessary to successfully meet its mandate. In addition, States Parties have recognized the valuable contributions made by related international, regional, and non-governmental organizations in giving effect to the biological weapons ban. States Parties should continue to find ways to ensure that such necessary efforts are sufficiently funded into the future.

Mr. Chair,

The Biological Weapons Convention is not only a vital component of the global disarmament framework, but also of broader global health security efforts and international humanitarian law. Failure at the Eighth Review Conference to enable the BWC to adapt and thus retain its relevancy in an ever-evolving age will impact humanity's ability to prevent and mitigate disease events that kill and maim on an ongoing basis. The cost of a treaty that is not fit for purpose is one that will not be borne by diplomats in Geneva or New York but by our communities, societies, and families around the world.

Thank you.

This statement has been endorsed by:

Abt Associates, USA

American Biological Safety Association (ABSA International), USA

Biosecure Ltd, UK

Black Emergency Managers Association, USA

BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP)

Cranfield University, UK: Stephen Johnson

Disarmament Dynamics, UK

EcoHealth Alliance, USA: William B. Karesh

Elizabeth R Griffin Research Foundation, USA

Elizabeth R Griffin Research Foundation, USA: James M. Welch

George Mason University, Schar School of Policy and Government, Biodefense Graduate Program, USA: Gregory Koblentz

Green Cross International, USA

Global Emerging Pathogens Treatment Consortium (GET), Sierra Leone

Hamburg University, Research Group for Biological Arms Control, Germany

Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Center for Communicable Disease Dynamics, USA: Marc Lipsitch

Harvard-Sussex Program, UK: Caitriona McLeish

Harvard-Sussex Program, UK: James Reville

Harvard University, USA: Ara Tahmassian

Independent Researcher, Germany: Kai Ilchmann

Independent Researcher, USA: Meagan Derringer

International Federation of Biosafety Associations (IFBA)

International Healing House, USA: Eleanor Pomeroy

International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility: Kathryn Nixdorff

International Office for Innovation in Reducing Crime, UK: Guy Collyer

Landau Network – Fondazione Volta, Italy

Louisiana State University, College of the Coast & Environment, Department of Environmental Science, USA: Martin Hugh-Jones

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Future of Life Institute

North Carolina State University, Department of Political Science, USA: Kathleen Vogel

Pro-Med, USA: Jack Woodall

Scientists Working Group on Biological and Chemical Security, Center for Arms Control and Non-proliferation

Human Security for Latin American & the Caribbean (SEHLAC) Network

Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict, India: Animesh Roul

Stanford University, Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), USA: Megan J. Palmer

The Trench, France: Jean Pascal Zanders

Toxic Remnants of War Project, UK

University of Bath, Department of Politics, Languages and International Studies, UK: Brett Edwards

University of Bradford, Division of Peace Studies, UK: Malcolm R. Dando, Graham S. Pearson and Simon Whitby

University of Cambridge, Centre for the Study of Existential Risk, UK

University of Oxford, Future of Humanity Institute, UK: Andrew Snyder-Beattie

UPMC Center for Health Security, USA

USCACH.org, USA

Verification Research, Training and Information Centre (VERTIC), UK

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World Council of Churches – Commission of the Churches on International Affairs