Statement to the First Committee by Ambassador Marius Grinius, Chairman of the 2009 meetings of the Biological Weapons Convention

New York, 16 October 2009

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

In my capacity as Chairman of the 2009 Meetings of the Biological Weapons Convention, I am pleased to be able to take this opportunity to inform the First Committee of the activities of the States Parties to the Convention, and the progress made, since last year, in implementing the decisions and recommendations of the 2006 Sixth Review Conference.

This year, under my chairmanship, the BWC States Parties are considering the topic of promoting capacity building in the fields of disease surveillance, detection, diagnosis, and containment of infectious diseases. When I agreed to chair this year’s meetings, I knew it would be important to continue to innovate, to build upon the firm foundations laid by the chairs of the previous meetings and to push the boundaries of what the Biological Weapons Convention can accomplish. It was important to me that our work produced real results and did not degenerate into a ‘talking shop’. Translating our discussions in Geneva, into tangible benefits for the global fight against infectious disease, however, was not going to be so easy. When I wrote to States Parties in February to announce my plans for the year, I warned them that I would seek an ‘action-based outcome’.

It is with considerable pleasure that I am able to report that the Meeting of Experts, which was held from 24 to 28 August, proved to be a great
success. Around five hundred participants from over one hundred countries took part. Almost two hundred technical experts provided input. Three arms of the United Nations, six international organizations and specialised agencies, and ten of the Guests of the Meetings I invited, contributed to our work. My pleas to help get experts to the meeting were acted upon; around twenty experts from around ten countries were sponsored to take part. The meeting amassed a great deal of very high quality information. The half session run by the Food and Agriculture Organization, World Health Organization, and World Organization for Animal Health was a personal highpoint of the week. The presentations, statements and working papers produced for the meeting are all available on the BWC’s website. For the first time we also webcast live a large portion of the meeting and recordings of the video footage are also available on the website. This helped to ensure that those experts unable to travel to our meeting are still able to benefit from our efforts.

At the Meeting of Experts we heard about resources available, assistance extended, cooperation undertaken, and opportunities waiting, and just as importantly, we heard about needs and challenges, shortfalls in capacity and resources, and obstacles and difficulties in coordination, cooperation and development. Many delegations highlighted the global dimension of the topic, noting that, as the delegation of Georgia put it, "infectious diseases know no geographic boundaries; neither should we in combating them." Many participants also spoke of the need to coordinate assistance, cooperation and capacity building activities. Other proposals included: strengthening exchange of information and cooperation between States Parties and relevant international

1 www.unog.ch/bwc
organizations; assisting states parties in the full implementation of the 2005 WHO International Health Regulations; cooperation between the public and private sector on disease surveillance; investment in human resources training and infrastructure; the development of standard operating procedures for disease management; partnerships between labs in developed and developing countries; the development of new vaccines; ensuring the sustainability of new capacity in developing countries; the development of regionally-implemented health systems; and the establishment of a mechanism to promote the implementation of Article X of the BWC.

Although we heard a great number of perspectives during the meeting, there were four common themes that ran through many of the presentations and working papers: the need for sustainability - if we are to build enduring capacity, we need to do more than just provide resources and equipment; the need for an integrated approach to human, animal and plant diseases, pooling information and resources, and coordinating efforts and institutions; the need to coordinate assistance, cooperation and capacity building activities – nationally, regionally and internationally; and the benefits of identifying specific national and regional needs and challenges to building capacity – enabling a tailored response.

A successful Meeting of Experts was only the first hurdle. My attention is now firmly fixed upon the Meeting of States Parties (MSP), scheduled for 7 to 11 December, where we must consolidate our efforts and translate them into real returns. In view of the upcoming MSP, I have sent a letter yesterday to all Geneva-based Permanent Representatives of States Parties. My letter conveys a synthesis paper that consolidates the
proposals and ideas expressed at our Meeting of Experts in August. I hope the synthesis paper will be a useful resource for States Parties to draw upon in the preparations for the December MSP. My letter also provides a provisional agenda for the MSP, following the same format as that of last year. I remain committed to an action-based outcome in December, one that will involve all relevant stakeholders and which takes advantage of genuine partnership to yield tangible returns for our collective benefit. Dealing with infectious disease, irrespective of cause, will never be a simple matter but will clearly necessitate a coordinated and consolidated international approach. I believe the BWC has a key role to play.

Mr. Chairman,

We are making progress in another of the key areas mandated by the Review Conference, enhancing participation in the Confidence-Building Measures. Since the Sixth Review Conference, we have managed to maintain a participation rate of over 60 states per year. Whilst this is an improvement on the years prior to the last review, levels of participation need to be much higher. I am happy to be able to report a number of initiatives that might help us increase this number. The Seventh Review Conference will look at this issue in depth. States, NGOs and experts have already begun their preparations. I have already attended one expert meeting on how to revise the CBMS and am pleased there are follow-up events planned for later this year and early next year. I am sure this process will provide valuable input for our deliberations in 2011. Thinking about what we could do in the future is not enough. We must take action now. That is why it is also a pleasure to be able to report that thanks to the European Union Joint Action in support of the Convention
that there is, currently under development, a guide to help states participate in the CBM regime and that resources are available to provide some in-country assistance for the completion of a country’s first CBM report. I am confident that these resources will help increase participation prior to the next review conference.

Another of the major outcomes of the Sixth Review Conference was the establishment of the Implementation Support Unit (ISU). The ISU has been very well-received by States Parties. A small unit of only three full-time staff, it has performed with great efficiency its task of "helping States Parties help themselves". States Parties have benefited from a source of advice, coordination and communication, from greater cohesion to their activities, and from less reinventing of wheels. Other organizations and activities have benefited from the BWC at last having an institutional focus: a central point of communication and interaction. The ISU model has proved a success, and I would encourage States Parties to consider how it might be built upon and developed at the Seventh Review Conference and beyond. I also believe the ISU could serve as a useful model for support to our other disarmament and non-proliferation regimes.

Whilst there is much positive to discuss, I am concerned that our efforts to expand the membership of this treaty appear to have lost momentum. Whilst other WMD treaty regimes are approaching universality, the Biological Weapons Convention lags behind. Four states joined the treaty in 2007. A further four joined in 2008. I have to report that so far this year, we have no new additions. Although outreach efforts continue and some states have reported positive steps towards ratifying or acceding to the Convention, I am not particularly hopeful that out
membership will expand any further this year. I will certainly be doing my part. I will be using the opportunities offered around the margins of the First Committee to pursue this agenda. I would encourage other States Parties to do likewise.

Given my mandate to coordinate universalization efforts I know that some of our States Parties are active in this area; others less so. We must find ways to redouble our efforts. States Parties to the Convention must work even harder to persuade the remaining 32 non-parties to join. In most cases, there is no political obstacle to accession: it is simply a matter of domestic priorities in the states concerned. We must do everything we can to move BWC accession higher on the national agendas of states not party – in the interests of all.

Mr. Chairman,

In closing, I would note that we are drawing ever closer to the next review conference of the Biological Weapons Convention in 2011. Both the current intersessional process and its predecessor which ran from 2003 to 2005 have resulted in steady progress. They have enabled states to focus on how they translate the aims and objective of this international treaty into effective national action. They have helped to build bridges and have resulted in a regime that has gathered both momentum and pace. Much more remains to be done. I believe that the 2011 review conference provides an opportunity to move up a gear and for the Biological Weapons Convention to start to work on how states can work together more effectively. This is a rare chance and one we must seize with both hands.
Thank you, Mr. Chairman.  (END)