STATEMENT BY
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Mr. Chairman,

I have the honour to address the Committee in my capacity as President-designate of the Seventh Review Conference of the Biological Weapons Convention, which will be held in Geneva from 5 to 22 December 2011.

I know that I do not need to spend any time introducing the BWC: delegations are all familiar with its importance as a key component of the international community’s efforts against the threats posed by weapons of mass destruction. The Convention is a fundamental pillar of international security, an important forum for addressing the full range of biological risks and engaging the relevant actors, and a means by which we can work to ensure that biological science and technology are safely and securely developed for the benefit of all.

The Seventh Review Conference represents a crucial opportunity to maintain and improve this important treaty. Following a time of turbulence and division, the States Parties to the Convention have worked hard over the past ten years to find areas of common understanding, and have built a vibrant and active community devoted to better practical implementation of the provisions of the treaty. The Sixth Review Conference in 2006 succeeded in consolidating this new and positive direction for the regime, and took several important steps, including creating the BWC Implementation Support Unit and commissioning a second intersessional work programme.

So the States Parties to the BWC are in perhaps the best position for over a decade to agree on major new steps to improve the effectiveness and implementation of the Convention. And I am pleased to report that, in recognition of this fact, the States Parties have been working actively and constructively, with admirable energy and sense of common purpose, to prepare for the Review Conference. The Preparatory Committee held in Geneva in April this year took place in a very collegial and positive atmosphere, and succeeded in agreeing all the necessary procedural mechanisms for the Review Conference, including a provisional agenda.

This promising start on the formal procedural side has been matched by an impressive number of informal workshops and seminars held to begin exploring substantive issues for the Conference. These efforts started with an event in the United Kingdom back in September 2010. That was followed by meetings in China, Switzerland, Germany, the Philippines and the Netherlands. Further such events are planned for Peru, Serbia and Switzerland in November. In addition to these gatherings, I have been consulting widely with individual States Parties, in Geneva, here in New York, and in a number of capitals.

In the course of these meetings and consultations, a relatively coherent picture has emerged of the areas in which a result will be necessary if the Review Conference is to be considered a success. These are, in no particular order:

- A new work programme for the BWC - on what and how should States Parties take their efforts forward? Should we create a series of thematic working groups to increase flexibility and facilitate the continuation of efforts between official meetings? Who should be involved?

- Annual exchanges of information – how best to improve the BWC’s Confidence Building Measures reporting system? Are there specific reforms that we can already agree in December? Will we need a continuing process to examine more fundamental changes?

- Relevant advances in science and technology – there seems to be broad agreement on the need for a more structured, regular way of monitoring scientific developments and assessing their significance for the treaty. What format would
best fit the nature of the BWC? Should we make use of a standing advisory panel or create a more flexible, multi-stakeholder process?

- The future of the Implementation Support Unit – what institutional support do States Parties need to continue their work? How should the Unit evolve to best support the efforts of the States Parties to fully implement the Convention?

- Cooperation and assistance – how can we improve the way States Parties work together and with their international partners in building capacity and promoting the peaceful uses of biological science and technology? Do we need some sort of focal point or mechanism to coordinate such efforts?

- Compliance and verification – what, if anything, can be done to ensure that States Parties are complying with their obligations and properly implementing the treaty? Given the difficult history, how do we approach this issue in a practical, de-politicized way that produces tangible security benefits for all the international community? Is this something that can be dealt with effectively in December, or do we need to create some additional space to consider this issue?

- Universalization – how to increase treaty membership, which at 164 members lags behind other important security treaties? Who is going to undertake which tasks? How are we to improve coordination and add value to efforts to increase membership?

Views on some of these issues are more developed than on others. Some of these issues present no great problems of principle or politics: we will need only to settle the details, and perhaps find the necessary financial resources. Others, such as compliance and verification, are more sensitive and will require all States Parties to show flexibility, resourcefulness and innovation. We must be realistic about what we can achieve. However, the messages I have heard so far are largely positive. I am convinced that we will be able to make considerable progress across the full scope of the treaty.

Some States Parties have already contributed working papers outlining specific proposals in several of these areas, and more are expected soon. I have been encouraging all States Parties to study these proposals and to discuss them with the originators and with other delegations. Critical feedback can help to refine and improve proposals, increasing their chances of gaining consensus. Or alternative proposals can be put forward in response, giving States Parties another perspective and avenue of approaching the issue. Whatever the issue in question, I have been urging States Parties to look for common elements and potential synergies, rather than focusing on points of difference.

In addition to considering the specific issues I have just outlined, the Review Conference will also have to deal with the traditional article-by-article review of the Convention, examining each article in the light of developments over the past five years, and recording collective determination of the States Parties on each. The Conference has also been specifically mandated to consider the work and outcome of the 2007-2010 Intersessional work programme and decide on any further action. This will be a considerable task, as the intersessional programme produced a wealth of detailed common understandings on national implementation, biosafety and biosecurity, scientific oversight, education and awareness-raising, capacity-building for disease surveillance and response, and assistance in the case of use of biological weapons.

Mr. Chairman,

The States Parties to the BWC will be dealing with a wide range of challenging issues at the Review Conference. They will need help. As the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, said in 2008: "Governments alone cannot confront the risks
posed by biological weapons ... to manage the full spectrum of biological risks – from naturally-occurring diseases, accidents and negligence to terrorism and the deliberate use of biological weapons – you need a cohesive, coordinated network of activities and resources. Such a network will help to ensure that biological science and technology can be safely and securely developed for the benefit of all”.

I would like to take this opportunity to encourage all those who have participated in the BWC network in the course of the Intersessional work programme – international organisations such as WHO, FAO, OIE and Interpol, scientific and professional associations such as the Global Network of Science Academies (IAP) and the International Federation of Biosafety Associations (IFBA), academic institutions and NGOs – to join us at the Review Conference and add their voices, experience and expertise to our deliberations.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I would like to remind delegations of the overall importance of the Review Conference, and of the BWC itself. We need to remember why we are doing all this: it is not just for the sake of having a big multilateral meeting. The BWC is a fundamentally important tool in ensuring that disease is not used as a weapon, and that advances in biological science and technology are used in support of peace, security and development, not against them. The States Parties to the BWC should justly be proud of the work they have done over the past few years on strengthening the implementation of the treaty, but there is still vast scope for improvement. Biological threats and risks continue to evolve, while awareness remains low and management uneven and often ineffective. The level of national implementation, although generally improving, remains patchy and inconsistent. The ISU is a good start, but there remains a serious lack of support for those needing assistance to fully implement their obligations under the Convention. We still have no clear idea of how to respond if a biological weapon were to be used, nor any way of objectively monitoring or assessing compliance.

We will certainly not be able to solve all of these problems in one go at the Review Conference, but I believe it is important to make every effort to make significant progress with as many of them as we can. We must not shy away from reaching for success. We must be ambitious if we are to make most of the opportunities which are presented to us. For this reason, I have advocated an approach of ambitious realism. We must develop practical proposals that go at least some way to addressing these pressing challenges. I am ready to do my part as President-designate in facilitating the development of proposals and steering the Conference to a successful outcome. I urge all States Parties to play their part in shaping the future of the BWC and taking specific, effective steps to reduce the risks posed to international security by biological weapons.

Thank you, Mr Chairman.