

**Remarks of Richard Merrin, Deputy Political Counselor
On behalf of Ambassador Mari Carmen Aponte
U.S. Embassy San Salvador**

The Biological Weapons Convention entered into force in 1975 – forty years ago. It’s a fairly simple agreement, only a few pages long: States Parties pledge:

- Not to retain, acquire, or develop biological weapons;
- To get rid of any biological weapons they may have previously possessed;
- Not to transfer biological weapons to others, or to assist them in acquiring such weapons;
- To assist each other in the event of a biological weapons attack;
- And to work together to facilitate international exchange in the life sciences for peaceful purposes, and the development, and application, of those disciplines to combat disease.

There’s another promise, as well: they commit to adopting appropriate national measures to “prohibit and prevent” anyone under their jurisdiction from developing, acquiring, or transferring biological weapons. This is a particularly important commitment in the context of this meeting, because parliamentarians have a critical role in establishing the laws and structures that give effect to this undertaking.

This is an important task – while the Biological Weapons Convention was drafted at a time when the real concern was large-scale, state-level bioweapons programs, things have changed. Increasingly, the threat of biological weapons is potentially within the reach not only of governments, but terrorist and insurgent groups. And the world is currently witnessing resurgence in the use of chemical weapons; there is no reason to think such actors will draw a moral line at the use of biological weapons.

But the materials, equipment, and knowledge needed to make biological weapons are largely the same as those needed to develop vaccines or conduct a wide range of other important activities. So “prohibiting” may be pretty straightforward, but “preventing”—without disrupting important, beneficial research and development-- is quite a challenge.

The Ebola outbreak in West Africa has demonstrated the international community’s vulnerability to infectious disease, raising troubling questions about our collective ability to respond to the deliberate use of such a pathogen. How do we ensure that we can live up to the Biological Weapons Convention’s commitment to provide assistance in the event of an attack?

Parliamentarians have an important role to play in addressing these issues. But it is also a job that requires sustained diplomatic work. We need to work collectively to ensure that we are able to use the Biological Weapons Convention to confront the challenges of today.

Next year – in 2016 – the States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention will hold their Eighth Review Conference, to assess the functioning of the Convention and to map out next steps for the coming years. I’d like to take a few minutes to outline for you how the United States views this important opportunity.

Some of you will have heard about the unsuccessful efforts in the 1990s to negotiate a “protocol” – a supplementary treaty. Some governments are again calling for the negotiation of such a protocol. My government understands why some find this appealing, but it is, unfortunately, a road that goes nowhere. It means that nothing will be accomplished until we reach agreement on EVERYTHING – and there are simply too many divisive issues for this to be realistic. You are all legislators – I suspect this sounds all too familiar to many of you.

But we don't have to resolve this disagreement to take action to strengthen the Convention. By acknowledging these divisions, setting them respectfully to one side, and focusing on practical steps that build on areas of agreement, the 8th Review Conference itself could take steps that rapidly and significantly strengthen the Convention. Biological Weapons Convention States Parties already have the necessary authority to do what is needed; we must marshal the political will to make use of it.

The Review Conference should take action to address the key challenges we confront:

- To strengthen national implementation to address the threats of proliferation and terrorism;
- To enhance transparency and assurance of compliance;
- To strengthen international capacities for coordination, investigation, and assistance in the event of a suspicious outbreak or biological weapons attack; and
- To assess and respond to developments in science and technology, including through oversight, outreach, and education.

No matter how much we accomplish in these areas at the Review Conference itself, we will need to equip ourselves to support, implement, and build on these agreements in the years to follow – and so the Conference should also take steps to strengthen our ability to take collective action at and between Review Conferences.

- We should adjust working methods to improve the capacity for in-depth substantive and technical discussions, providing opportunities for in-depth discussion of key issues by technical experts.
- We should enhance the authority of the annual Meeting of States Parties by establishing clear parameters for decision-making to

oversee, implement, and build on the decisions of the Review Conference.

- We should strengthen the Implementation Support Unit consistent with the strengthened structures described above and with the tasks entrusted to them by the Review Conference.
- And we should take steps to provide greater oversight and steering: There's a reason why most international bodies have some sort of executive board – it helps keep things on track. Biological Weapons Convention States Parties could and should establish a representative Steering Group to support the Chairman, help to identify and prepare issues for consideration at the Annual Meetings, and maintain an ongoing focus on Biological Weapons Convention issues in Geneva.

The United States believes that our governments can accomplish a great deal at the next Review Conference, if we are pragmatic and willing to work together. And I believe that this work at the international level, and efforts like those of Parliamentarians for Global Action can greatly reinforce each other.

Thank you for your time and for your support for the Biological Weapons Convention.