Distinguished Chair, Excellencies, Colleagues,

Canada welcomes your leadership, Chair, and assures you of its full confidence and cooperation. We have much work to do, and we are confident that you will guide us with skill and wisdom.

As has been underscored by previous speakers, we meet in extraordinary times. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc around the world. Each day the casualties and costs of the pandemic mount, sending ever-more painful reminders of just how vulnerable our inter-connected global community is to threats posed by infectious diseases, whether deliberate, accidental or natural in origin.

The devastation caused by the pandemic - now it its 20th month – must drive a renewed commitment to end the stalemate – now in its 20th year - that has prevented meaningful progress to strengthen the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC).

The continued fixation of some on the Convention’s past, and their stubborn insistence on perennially re-fighting battles from long ago, can no longer be accepted. Let us be clear - the dangers posed by biological weapons and the deliberate use of disease by states or terrorists is too great, and the consequences of a less than fully-effective BTWC too grave, to tolerate the status quo any longer.

As we march towards next year’s Ninth Review Conference, Canada encourages BTWC States Parties to do so with “realistic ambition”. This means acknowledging that we will not be in a position to resolve all of the Convention’s challenges in 2022, but that we can and must make meaningful progress to pave the way for ongoing, incremental advances in the years ahead.

Canada sees three specific areas where such progress is entirely within reach.

First, we must strengthen the Implementation Support Unit (ISU). Canada commends the ISU for the extraordinary work it continues to perform, but it is self-evident that the ISU lacks the complement of personnel and level of resourcing required to fulfill its potential. The ISU has proven its worth over many years. It is time that States Parties better equip it to deliver the critical mandate entrusted to it. At the same time, we must address the Convention’s financial uncertainty. We call on all States to fulfil their financial obligations under the Convention and to pay their assessed contributions on time and in full.

Second, we must endeavour to re-engage and re-empower the silent majority of States Parties that have turned their attention away from the BTWC owing to frustration with the 2-decade impasse. Canada is confident that the overwhelming majority of State Parties are firmly committed to strengthening the Convention, but that their aspirations have been frustrated by a vocal minority. We therefore will be
working cross-regionally, and through efforts such as the Global Partnership’s Signature Initiative to Mitigate Biological Threats in Africa, to harness that collective will. The more voices there are at the BTWC table demanding progress, the more likely we are to achieve progress.

Third, we must redouble our efforts to improve the BTWC’s existing tools, such as Confidence Building Measures and Article VII Provisions. We should also pursue further practical and possible measures, such as enhanced cooperation on science and technology, universality and full and effective implementation of all aspects of the Convention by States Parties. We know this can be done, because this type of work is already underway. For years Canada has been supporting work related to operationalization of Article VII, mitigating risks posed by dual use research of concern and assisting partner states to fully and effectively implement their Convention obligations. This work by Canada and others provides a solid foundation on which we can build.

Before concluding, Mr. Chairman, let me underline that Canada is a strong supporter of the UN Secretary General’s Mechanism for Investigation of Alleged Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons, including its independence and effectiveness. We are also fully committed to mainstreaming a gender perspective into all disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control work, including through promoting the full, equal, and meaningful participation of women in the work related to the BWC.

Mr Chairman

Every nation represented in this Convention, and every individual in this room, has witnessed the awesome, devastating power of disease.

We must both take warning and draw inspiration from the pandemic.

The threat posed by biological weapons is very real, but our capacity to mitigate those threats through the BTWC is, at present, very limited.

It is time to turn that page. The world needs an effective BTWC. It is within our collective ability to deliver that.