

## Statement to Biological Weapons Convention Preparatory Committee, Geneva 4 April 2022



Mr Chair, Distinguished Representatives:

We condemn Russia's unprovoked military invasion and its continuing war against Ukraine. We stand with the government and people of Ukraine, and we urge Russia to stop its brutal attacks.

We echo the call by the World Health Organization, UNICEF and UNFPA to immediately cease attacks on hospitals, ambulances and medical staff.<sup>1</sup> It is an unacceptable strategy and tactic.<sup>2</sup>

Mr Chair,

Russia accuses Ukraine of working on biological weapons supported by the United States and other countries. There is no evidentiary basis to suggest that Ukraine's biological activities support anything other than peaceful purposes, and we call on Russia to cease these allegations. Ukraine carries out biological research for legitimate public health and veterinary health purposes. Ukraine does so transparently and in full compliance with its legal obligations under the BWC.

International support for biological research in Ukraine is no secret. Ukraine, along with the United States and other States Parties providing support to biological research in Ukraine, are transparent about their activities. They annually declare their activities under the BWC's confidence-building measures, and they voluntarily share this information publicly. This contrasts sharply with Russia, which appears to actively withhold its own BWC-relevant research activities from public scrutiny.

Russia's allegations tie into a long history of false claims and 'active measures' stretching back to the early years of the Cold War, as we and many others in the NGO community have documented in detail and communicated.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, despite their outrageous falsehoods, Russia's unsupported allegations should not be dismissed as inconsequential. They muddy the waters, making it harder for non-experts to distinguish between true and false narratives. Disinformation could further escalate the war. It could create perceptions that the taboo against biological weapons no longer holds. If unanswered, false allegations can linger and take on a malevolent life of their own that damages the Convention's integrity.

We commend the swift and strong rebuttal of Russia's baseless claims in the UN Security Council by Security Council members and by the UN Secretary-General's High Representative for Disarmament Affairs.<sup>4</sup> We equally commend rebuttals in the UN General Assembly.<sup>5</sup> Russia cannot be permitted to manipulate the United Nations to spread and attempt to legitimize its disinformation. Similarly, Russia's excessive *notes verbales* to BWC States Parties and its

recently announced UN Security Council Arria formula meeting on 6 April 2022 with presentations by 'independent experts' cannot be allowed to proceed unchallenged.

If Russia has genuine concerns about non-compliance, it should use the bilateral and multilateral consultation provisions contained in Article V of the BWC to establish the pertinent facts and provide clarity on the activities in question. It is telling that Russia has chosen not to do so, preferring instead to broadcast its accusations to the media. Russia's recent behaviour appears inconsistent with its professed desire, over many years, to support and strengthen the Convention.

Mr Chair,

The military utility of biological weapons is limited. However, biological weapons attacks can be difficult to attribute, and this makes them particularly susceptible to 'false flag' operations.

We welcome NATO and G7 intelligence disclosures on the possibility of Russia using biological or chemical weapons allegations as a pretext to employ unconventional weapons in its war against Ukraine, and the resolve of NATO and G7 members that any such use would result in severe consequences.<sup>6</sup> We commend their united efforts to raise the political stakes of an unconventional attack. Heightening the political costs of severe norm violation is an important tool to maintain the integrity of the prohibitions against biological and chemical weapons.

In the case of a suspected attack with biological weapons, the UN Secretary-General has the authority to initiate an investigation. In the last two years, in particular, Russia has been actively trying to undermine the mechanism's integrity, independence and impartial character, and to strip away the UN Secretary-General's authority by transferring investigation decisions to the UN Security Council where Russia has a veto.<sup>7</sup> We commend the UN General Assembly's overwhelming rejections of Russia's draft resolutions in 2020 and 2021.

Mr Chair,

The international community must remain steadfast in supporting, protecting and strengthening arms control and disarmament instruments. This is in the interest of all people, including the Russian people. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine and Russia's biological information warfare should galvanize State Parties' political resolve in the lead up to the Ninth Review Conference to strengthen the resourcing, institutionalization and operationalization of the BWC, including strengthening compliance assessment tools and investigation procedures. We stand ready to support you.

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## Statement endorsed by:

### *Institutional endorsers:*

- African Center for Science and International Security (AFRICISIS), Ghana
- Argentina Information Quality, Argentina
- Biosafety Association for Central Asia and Caucasus (BACAC)
- Council on Strategic Risks, USA
- Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Scientists Working Group on Biological and Chemical Security, USA
- Center for Biodefense and Global Infectious Diseases, Mexico
- Center for Global Health Science and Security at Georgetown, USA
- The Foundation for the Development of Biotechnology and Genetics 'POLBIOGEN', Poland
- Hamburg University Research Group for Biological Arms Control, Germany
- Next Generation Global Health Security Network
- Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland
- The Trench, France

### *Individual endorsers:*

- Shuji Amano, Nihon Institute of Medical Science, Japan
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- Lela Bakanidze, Biosafety Association for Central Asia and Caucasus, Georgia

- Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, Avon Protection, United Kingdom
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- Richard T. Cupitt, The Stimson Center, USA
- Malcolm Dando, independent CBW expert, United Kingdom
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- Mirko Himmel, University of Hamburg, Germany
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- Kathleen Vogel, Arizona State University and Scientists Working Group, Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, USA
- John R Walker, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office 1985-2020, United Kingdom
- Sam Weiss Evans, Harvard University, USA

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<sup>1</sup> WHO Surveillance system for attacks on health care: <https://extranet.who.int/ssa/Index.aspx>; UNICEF, UNFPA and WHO, 'Stop attacks on health care in Ukraine' 13 March 2022: <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/stop-attacks-health-care-ukraine>.

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<sup>4</sup> Security Council on Russia allegations of military biological activities in Ukraine (11 March 2022): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olHRu\\_Ou4WI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olHRu_Ou4WI); Ukraine - Security Council | Allegations of chemical weapons (18 March 2022) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gu5Qr9I-Xk>.

<sup>5</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> Emergency Special Session of the UN General Assembly on Ukraine, convened by S/RES/2623 (2022).

<sup>6</sup> Statement by NATO Head of State and Government, 24 March 2022: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_193719.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_193719.htm); G7 Leaders' statement, 24 March 2022: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/da/press/press-releases/2022/03/24/g7-leaders-statement-brussels-24-march-2022/>;

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