

Statement and Right of Reply by the U.S. Special Representative for the
Biological Weapons Convention
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Second Preparatory Committee Meeting
For the Ninth Review Conference for the Biological Weapons Convention
April 4, 2022

(As prepared for delivery)

Mr. Vice-Chairs,

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to strengthen the international tools against biological threats, whether natural, accidental, or deliberate in origin. That includes strengthening the Biological Weapons Convention.

It is an honor to be here as the U.S. Special Representative for the Biological Weapons Convention. The United States is committed to helping ensure that the forthcoming Review Conference is productive. We are optimistic that under your leadership this session will set the stage for a successful Review Conference.

The tasks for this session are two-fold – first, to identify possible areas of consensus for the Review Conference, and secondly, to decide key organizational issues. Today I will outline U.S. views in both areas.

Mr. Vice-Chairs,

This Sunday marks the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the BWC. For half a century, it has embodied our mutual belief that the use of biological or toxin weapons “would be repugnant to the conscience of mankind.” In those fifty years, much has changed both in the life sciences and in the international security landscape, but the importance of the BWC’s prohibitions has not. There will be an event to commemorate this anniversary on Wednesday after the afternoon plenary.

At the BWC Meeting of States Parties last autumn, Under Secretary Bonnie Jenkins stressed the need to bring the BWC into the 21st century, putting behind us the two-decades-long dispute over the resumption of Protocol negotiations and starting a new chapter. She urged that at the Review Conference, States Parties adopt and implement without delay specific measures to strengthen the Convention. In addition, States Parties should undertake a new effort, in the form of a temporary expert group, to examine options to enhance confidence and promote compliance. The United States believes that it is important to pursue both parts of this initiative.

That requires taking decisions on matters that have broad support and addressing the harder questions about transparency and compliance. The two approaches are complementary, not mutually exclusive.

Success will also depend on new resources. We need to alert our authorities at home now that if they expect more from the BWC they must also be prepared to devote more financial and personnel resources to it. We will discuss our ideas further in this session. As we continue to refine and elaborate our ideas, others' insights and perspectives will be crucial.

Mr. Vice-Chairs,

This week we also need to deal with urgent organizational issues: firming up the Conference dates and designating a President for the Review Conference. Due to unforeseen circumstances, the previous understanding regarding the dates of the Review Conference is increasingly problematic as circumstances have changed substantially since the MSP decision.

We face the unexpected prospect that the NPT and BWC review conferences would be held simultaneously and an unexpected shift of responsibility for identifying a Review Conference President.

Many States Parties have said clearly that it will not be possible for them to staff two major review conferences at the same time. Moreover, these dates have made the search for a President for the Review Conference very difficult.

The United States is flexible on the timing of the Review Conference after August. We are open to considering other approaches. We will work with the Vice-Chairs, the ISU, and delegations to identify an approach to the timing and venue of the Review Conference which can garner wide support. Our focus should be on ensuring a successful Review Conference, even if this would require some flexibility on the part of delegations.

Mr. Vice-Chairs,

Before concluding I must address another development that has profoundly changed the environment in which we are working. I refer to the premeditated, unprovoked, and unjustified attack on Ukraine by the Russian Federation. My government rejects the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine and the pretexts used to justify it.

In particular, we reject Russia's allegations that peaceful, U.S.-supported activities in Ukraine are in violation of the Biological Weapons Convention.

I regret that we even need to defend this work – yet again – but we are facing rampant Russian disinformation that is being echoed by the PRC.

When the Soviet Union dissolved, it left Ukraine with a weak public health system and dual-use facilities from the Soviet biological weapons program. The United States, working with governments of the former Soviet Union, including Russia and Ukraine, created several programs to mitigate such risks.

These efforts advance peaceful public and veterinary health goals, enhance cooperation between Ukraine's scientists and global experts, and ensure safe, secure human and animal health

facilities and laboratories. These are exactly the kinds of programs the U.S. and other governments conduct, collaboratively, in many other countries present here today.

These efforts help to implement both our Article X obligations, and the WHO International Health Regulations (2005), by strengthening national disease prevention, surveillance, control, and response systems to help protect from another pandemic.

We hope colleagues here will attend the side event that we are sponsoring today to explain more fully our work in Ukraine. In addition, our experts would be happy to meet with you informally to provide additional information.

In spreading disinformation about these programs and those of other BWC States Parties, Russia is undercutting broader efforts to implement the Article X commitment to cooperation and assistance, as well as efforts to strengthen global health security.

Mr. Vice-Chairs, that concludes my remarks. You can count on the full support of the U.S. Delegation in completing the work of the PrepCom. Thank you.

[U.S. RIGHT OF REPLY]

Mr. Vice-Chairs,

As I said earlier today, my colleagues and I will do our best to work cooperatively with you and all delegations to make this session a productive one. We all know that rights of reply rarely contribute to the productiveness of an international meeting.

Unfortunately, sometimes they are necessary, and this is one of those times. Earlier, two delegations alleged that U.S. activities are in violation of the Biological Weapons Convention.

The Russian representative claimed that what he called “military biomedical activities” in Ukraine supported by the U.S. government are in violation of Articles I and IV of the BWC. He also asserted that Russia has publicly shared documents that confirm these allegations.

These claims are, simply put, lies. There are more diplomatic terms for it, but they are lies. This is the same Russian disinformation that has been repeatedly and conclusively debunked, not only by the United States, but by experts from around the world, including by Russian scientists.

The United States is in full compliance with the Biological Weapons Convention. We do not have a biological weapons program -- not in Ukraine, not anywhere.

Those who have reviewed the documents Russia referred to have quickly realized that they are the routine products of peaceful scientific cooperation. The imaginative narratives of Russian representatives pretending they are something more should be shelved in the fiction section.

This is not the behavior of a serious country seeking to address serious concerns. Russia's false claims are a shameless distraction from the awful violence Russia is perpetrating in Ukraine, and nothing more.

Mr. Vice-Chairs,

The Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran claimed that U.S. sanctions violate Article X of the Convention – a claim we flatly reject. The measures adopted by the United States were put in place to address threats to international security posed by Iran's actions; they also include exemptions for medicines and humanitarian assistance.

Mr. Vice-Chairs,

I must also correct some revisionist history presented today. Two delegations suggested that in 2001 the United States prevented agreement on a draft Protocol that was close to consensus adoption. Ironically, both delegations' governments were sponsors of a joint statement in 2001 that repudiated the Chairman's proposed compromise Protocol. In BWC Ad Hoc Group Working Paper 451 of 4 May, 2001, they instead maintained that "the Ad Hoc Group should immediately resume substantive negotiations based on the rolling text to achieve consensus on outstanding issues."

What were those outstanding issues? According to this group of delegations, "wide differences" remained on issues including "definitions, clarification visits, Executive Council decision-making for investigations, declaration triggers, transfers and export regulation, entry into force, etc." Those are not minor issues.

For those of you who did not live through this, the "rolling text" they wanted to return to contained over 1100 pairs of square brackets. So be skeptical about the claim that agreement on a BWC protocol was remotely close. Thank you.