

Statement by Ambassador Jayant Prasad, Permanent Representative of India to the Conference of Disarmament at the Meeting of States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction, Geneva, December 6, 2004

Mr. Chairman,

Allow me, first of all, to express the pleasure of my delegation in seeing you in the Chair. We are happy indeed that you are maintaining the high standards of leadership set last year by Ambassador Tibor Toth. We assure you of our fullest cooperation in the discharge of your responsibilities.

India believes that norms against biological weapons enshrined in the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention must be upheld, particularly at a time of heightened threat of biological weapons proliferation and bio-terrorism. Meaningful multilateral efforts should be pursued to strengthen these norms, since biological weapons could well become the weapon of choice for the terrorists due to ever increasing access to requisite technologies, materials and equipment. We have to guard against the increased risk, in this context, of hostile use of advances in biotechnology and the constant need to prevent misuse of biological agents.

The BTWC is the first disarmament instrument that bans the development, production, stockpiling and use of an entire class of weapons. India fully supports initiatives to strengthen the Convention, ensure its full implementation by all States Party and make it universal. In this context, my delegation fully subscribes to the statement made by the Ambassador of Malaysia on behalf of the non-aligned movement.

Mr. Chairman,

India has been playing a constructive role in international efforts aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of BTWC. It is committed to the ongoing process, established by the resumed session of the 5th review Conference in 2002, anchored in the multilateral framework, which is a prerequisite for addressing issues that affect the security of all nations. In our assessment, both Meetings held last year, that of Experts in August and of the States Party in December, were productive. They gave delegations the opportunity to exchange views and to promote, thereby, common understanding and effective action on national implementation of the prohibitions set forth in the Convention and national mechanisms to establish and maintain bio-security. This year as well there were useful exchanges among the States Party during the July Meeting of Experts, as also good presentations by the concerned international organisations, the World Health Organisation, Food and Agricultural Organisation and World Organisation for Animal Health.

Indian experts have actively participated in these exchanges and shared information on India's capabilities for responding to and investigating and mitigating the effects of cases of alleged use of biological and toxin weapons or suspicious outbreak of diseases and on our existing national efforts and mechanisms for the surveillance, detection, diagnosis and combating of infectious diseases affecting humans, animals and plants.

We have keenly followed the national overview statements and thematic presentations by other delegations. Their working papers and presentations contain many useful ideas and suggestions. We appreciate your initiative, Mr. Chairman, to compile and present them in your paper in a succinct and synthesised format. We hope that delegations will find your paper useful in considering measures to strengthen national disease surveillance mechanisms.

Mr. Chairman,

We are, first, considering the promotion of common understanding and effective action on enhancing international capabilities for responding to investigating and mitigating the effects of cases of alleged use of biological or toxin weapons or suspicious outbreaks of disease. Articles VI and VII of the Convention provide the mechanism for investigation into alleged use of biological and toxin weapons and to provide assistance in such cases. Thus, in cases of alleged use of biological weapons, there is a standing mandate from the Convention for the UN Security Council to initiate appropriate international procedures, including investigation of the allegations and provision of assistance in such cases. This has been supplemented by the specific tasking of the UN Secretary General by relevant General Assembly and Security Council resolutions.

It is, indeed, a matter of satisfaction that provisions of Article VI and VII have not been invoked. However, this also has resulted in the efficacy and adequacy of the prevailing mechanism remaining untested. We remain, therefore, in uncharted territory in considering how to enhance the international capabilities for responding to, investigating and mitigating the effects of cases of alleged use of biological or toxin weapons or suspicious outbreak of diseases.

It is the lack of a mechanism for verification of compliance, that diminishes the Convention's effectiveness. India is willing to consider all efforts to strengthen the Convention within a multilateral framework. We favour the inclusion of provisions of an adequate and effective verification mechanism in the BTWC. We also seek increased international cooperation in transfers and exchanges of biological materials and technologies for peaceful purposes.

Meanwhile, several new suggestions were made at the Meeting of Experts on strengthening the provisions of Articles VI and VII. These could be an important input for the next Review Conference, which is mandated to consider the work under the present process and decide possible follow-on action.

The second agenda item, strengthening and broadening national and international efforts and existing mechanisms for the surveillance, detection, diagnosis and combating of infectious diseases is closely linked to the first agenda item. The institutional mechanisms for surveillance and combating of outbreaks of infectious diseases remain the same, irrespective of whether the outbreak is a result of natural causes or an outcome of deliberate use of biological weapons. As we have stressed before, the primary responsibility for surveillance and combating of outbreak of infectious diseases rests with the States Parties, who require to develop national capabilities for the purpose.

Given the asymmetries among the States Party, it is unrealistic to expect all developing countries to have congruent or identical set of standards and institutional mechanisms to deal with surveillance, detection, diagnosis and combating of infectious diseases. The need to provide assistance to them in the

development of these capabilities has been recognised by the States Party to the Convention as well as by international organisations such as the WHO, FAO and OIE. We would, therefore, encourage the States Party and the concerned international organizations to provide ready assistance to other States Parties in accordance with the provisions of the Convention.

Mr. Chairman,

We are all aware of the circumstances that led to evolution of the present process, which essentially aims at promoting implementation of the provisions of BTWC by the States Party. The 5th Review Conference clearly spelt out the mandate, process and authority of decision making.

The purpose of the present process is to promote common understanding and effective action and not to seek or agree upon or arrive at any new common understandings. Since both aspects are interconnected and we are treading a fine line here, we should tread with care. Promoting effective action does indeed imply making the implementation of BTWC more precise, effective and operational. One way of so doing would be to assist States Parties to undertake full and effective implementation of their obligations under the Convention, including in relation to the two agenda items before us, but it must be left to their own national decision-making processes.

In our view, in the present circumstances, common understanding and effective action can best be promoted through an exchange of views and learning from each others national experiences and best practices. Besides, the agenda items being considered under the present process cover only some and not all the aspects of implementation of BTWC. The 6th Review Conference will be the proper forum to review the implementation of the Convention in its entirety, achieve overall balance in its results, and draw up recommendations, take decisions and undertake fresh commitments to strengthen the Convention and promote its implementation.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.