



Remarks to the Press at the Sixth Review Conference of the States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention

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Assistant Secretary Rood: Thank you all for being here today and for taking time to come to the press conference.

Thirty years ago, of course, the Biological Weapons Convention was established, and the United States remains fully committed to the Biological Weapons Convention. The 6th Review Conference provides an important opportunity for us to review progress and to talk about some positive and practical agenda items that we would like to promote over the coming three-week review conference period.

We believe there is much that can be accomplished during the Review Conference and we've put forward a very positive and practical agenda for work that we would like to see done there.

A key objective for the United States is agreement on a dedicated Action Plan promoting universal adherence to the BWC. The BWC today has 155 states parties. That lags significantly behind other key non-proliferation regime pillars such as the NPT or Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty with 188 members and the Chemical Weapons Convention with 180. We had a very positive experience in the Chemical Weapons Convention context with agreeing on an Action Plan to promote universality. That has yielded significant benefits. We'd like to see something similar adopted for the Biological Weapons Convention to promote universality. After all, a key part of our activity will be to ensure that this prohibition against the use of biology as a weapon is something which is a worldwide prohibition.

The second area where we would like to see an Action Plan adopted at this Review Conference refers to national implementation. While the BWC itself prohibits development, production, stockpiling or acquisition of biological weapons, the core of that prohibition is the activities that nations undertake to either prevent trade and technologies that can be used for those purposes or to police against violators, and to take steps to really realize the vision of the BWC. So we would like to see an "Action Plan on National Implementation" adopted. This was another area that we thought was successful in the Chemical Weapons Convention context where national implementation has been improved substantially through a similar Action Plan. So we're trying to import some of the lessons we've learned and successes from the Chemical Weapons Convention into the Biological Weapons Convention context.

We've also put forward some ideas for the program of work that would emerge from this Review Conference. There are four areas that we think are important. The first is disease surveillance; second is biosecurity -- that is to say better controls on material and technology that can be misused for biological weapons purposes; the third area is national enforcement of legislation; and the fourth area which we think is important is greater oversight on research to prevent the misuse of research for biological weapons purposes. We've had a successful discussion on codes of conduct for research, but this is really broader than establishing codes of conduct. Things like peer review and publication criteria to prevent research from inadvertently being used, or perhaps advertently for biological weapons purposes.

So we have come to Geneva. We have a strong U.S. delegation; a number of people from capitals like myself to advance the work of the BWC. We have put forward what we think is a very constructive, positive agenda focused on practical work items that will significantly improve the performance of the Convention.

In our initial consultations here in Geneva we've had a very positive reaction to the agenda that the United States has put forward, so we're relatively optimistic that we can have a successful Review Conference that yields practical items.

We've had a good three years, I think, in the 2003 to 2005 work program that was largely suggested by the United States. We would like to build on that with practical agenda items here that would come out of the Review Conference. Again, we're optimistic that that outcome can be achieved. It's only day one. I realize we have another three weeks of the Review Conference to go, but we're off to a good start.

With that, I should probably stop talking and just take your questions.

Question: Mr. Rood, you named in your speech three countries out of which Iran and Syria are two. I would just like to ask you, I might be wrong, there is a feeling that there is a mood of change after the Baker Commission on Iraq for the involvement of Iran and Syria in the Middle East to bring about change. Would that be a contradiction with what you said in your speech?

Assistant Secretary Rood: What I spoke about in my speech is that for the Biological Weapons Convention or any international arms control agreement to be successful, it needs to be adhered to. Where there are instances of violations of the central tenets of those agreements, we don't think it is a good idea for countries simply to turn a blind eye or to not consider compliance to be the essential element. After all, what good is an international norm if we don't take steps to ensure that it is actually lived up to?

So in my speech I did talk about the activities of three countries that do give us great concern, not only because of activities related to biological weapons, but also because of activities such as support for terrorism and lack of compliance with other international obligations. North Korea, Iran and Syria were the three countries that I cited in this speech, and we do have concerns there.

I think with regard to activities in the region, I'd say that the United States has made clear our positions with regard to both Syria and Iran and the need for them to control the borders and to play a constructive role in the region. That is a very complex set of issues that we're continuing to work, both the United States as well as our partners in that part of the world. But I would say that adherence to the Biological Weapons Convention is an issue which stands on its own and it's an area where we want nations to live up to their obligations. And we think they're very important obligations in the BWC.

Question: In 2001 the Review Conference essentially collapsed because the United States rejected the protocol which would have strengthened verification measures. Is there any sense of reviving this protocol, of trying to work on it? Has the conference essentially given up on doing any work on trying to get international verification measures enacted or put into the Convention? And if you don't have this, how can you really guarantee that countries are not cheating on their commitments if you don't have some kind of a means to monitor this? Which exists in the Chemical Weapons Convention, I believe, that you think highly of.

Assistant Secretary Rood: I think the agenda has moved on to a significant extent in the last three years. What you've seen is a constructive program of work being executed by countries with meetings on a regular basis. For instance, the issue that I raised earlier with codes of conduct to prevent misuse or the inadvertent mis-use of biological research. Substantial work has been done there and we'd like to build upon that work.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, we in the United States have put forward what we think is a very constructive and positive agenda that we are receiving very positive feedback on from our initial consultations with other nations that are attending the conference. So we're optimistic about progress.

I think with regard to the 2001 Protocol, I would differ with your characterization of it as being an effective verification mechanism, and I think that was the general consensus which is why there was a lot of criticism of that protocol. It would not have achieved its aim of improving verification. I think you used the word "guarantee". I could have that wrong, but I thought I heard you say how can you guarantee that states aren't violating their commitments to the BWC. That was the problem with the Protocol is that it fell far short of guaranteeing and we didn't think it would produce a significant or meaningful increase in the ability to verify states' obligations with the convention.

But I will say I have heard little conversation about that 2001 Protocol since arriving in Geneva. Again, the conversations I've had with states, they are focused on the work that's been done the last three years and the agreed Work Program where I think there's a general consensus that that's had a very positive effect. The states that I've consulted with seem to be focused on trying to carry that spirit forward and seeing if there isn't further work that can be done to realize the vision of the Work Program.

Question: May I just quickly follow up? That is, do you think that it would be possible to have some kind of an international verification measure that would work? That the United States could sign onto? Are you opposed to it generally because it might interfere with commercial secrets, that you might have leakage as far as that goes? Or do you think something like this could actually work? And don't you think that ultimately it needs to be done?

Assistant Secretary Rood: I think studies that have looked at verification issues have identified verification of the biological weapons issue as being substantially different than that which applies to the chemical industry. You mentioned the Chemical Weapons Convention. These are significantly different enterprises. The sort of tools that would need to be applied differ.

I think that we have not in our analysis seen a way to develop the sort of guaranteed verification measures you've cited. I think that's an area reasonable people can continue to study, but at present we don't see a regime that would be effective in that area.

Question: Coming back to your answers again on the issue of verification protocol and a credible international mechanism. The four goals that you have cited, namely disease surveillance, biosecurity, national enforcement and greater oversight on research laboratories. How credible they are without any verification procedures? Can countries, if tomorrow this issue comes up in any form by any of the members, is the US willing to address this? Because underlying the four concerns is somewhere the element of verification.

Assistant Secretary Rood: We are very serious about pursuing progress on these four items as well as others. The United States has put forward four ideas for intercessional activities plus the two Action Plans that we think make sense. This is, after all, an international Review Conference and we will certainly be open to the ideas of other nations that we think can make a positive and practical impact.

So first I would say those are just our initial thoughts, and hopefully at the end of three weeks there may be some other good ideas that emerge from the conference.

I think in the areas of disease surveillance, biosecurity, national enforcement of legislation and preventing the misuse of research, there is substantial work that will make a measurable difference, we think, in all of those areas. Some of that work will aid us in preventing biology being used as a weapon, but there are also secondary benefits which in some cases may not frankly be secondary. They might be co-equal. When you look at, for example, the work in disease surveillance, there is an obviously public health benefit there. There's an obvious benefit to developing countries from improved capabilities to examine instances of disease outbreaks and to determine whether they are naturally occurring or whether they are suspicious in nature or perhaps have a biological weapons tie.

The ability to do that rapidly, to analyze samples, for example, share them with the World Health Organization, and to allow for countries around the world to therefore take steps or to judge whether assistance needs to be provided, I think these are all very valuable.

It was interesting to me that in your statement you characterized that as a form of verification and I suppose there is a strain of that in the disease surveillance area, but I think in its first instance we're talking about providing the ability for follow-up to look at suspicious outbreaks, as I mentioned, and then dealing with those.

Question: I've got three questions. The first is, are there any significant states that are still outside the Biological Weapons Convention, or are we just talking about small Pacific islands?

The second question is, are you proposing that research publication should be censored? I seem to remember there was an article a couple of years ago from Australian researchers who had managed to clone a virulent flu virus and I think there was some controversy over whether that should have been published.

My third question is, does the United States have any evidence that there are terrorist groups out there that have a bioweapons capacity at the moment?

Assistant Secretary Rood: Would you repeat your first question, please?

Question: The first question was simply are there any significant states that are outside the Biological Weapons Convention.

Assistant Secretary Rood: With regard to your first question, there are some significant states which are outside the Biological Weapons Convention. For example, we're concerned that Syria is a signatory but not a party to the treaty. I highlighted in my speech some concerns we have with the Syrian government's activities with regard to biological weapons. Egypt is another state which sits outside the treaty.

I think in the area of universality with only 155 countries party, there is room for significant growth and we do think that an Action Plan with significant milestones, actual activities, directed activities to achieve universality, is important. Again, in the Chemical Weapons Convention context, that's been successful in raising the membership of the CWC. We'd like to see that success emulated in the Biological Weapons Convention context.

Your second question was, are we proposing censoring publications? What we're proposing is different in the sense that we think there needs to be -- we've had again, a successful effort on codes of conduct. There are other things such as I mentioned, criteria for publication, which we think are important. Also peer review and other steps like that. We in the United States are looking at some improvements in that area. We certainly don't think our efforts are perfect in that regard. But I think this is something that could be done more broadly because there is a legitimate concern about research inadvertently aiding biological weapons efforts.

Your last question was, if I had it right, does the United States have any evidence that terrorist groups possess biological weapons? Is that what you asked?

Question: Or have the capacity to produce them.

Assistant Secretary Rood: We have seen evidence of terrorist groups being interested in biological weapons and it's something which is a growing concern because where we've seen both growing indications of this increased interest and in ways that are troubling to us. So it's certainly something we've got to be very vigilant about and it's an important way that the current strategic environment is so different than what existed in '72 when the Biological Weapons Convention was originally conceived of.

So I think we're very mindful also of the effects that such an attack could have. In the United States we went through a period in 2001 with anthrax being placed in the mail, and those attacks had a significant effect even though they were on what at the time seemed like a very large scale, but in hindsight it could have been much larger.

So I think these aren't threats that are theoretical. We see them as real and a significant danger.

Question: I had two questions. The first one about Iran and Syria. Can you provide some sort of evidence or some explanation of how you have this understanding that they have in Iran an offensive biological weapons program, and in Syria, research and development in violation of the Convention?

The other question is on universality and the countries still outside. You mentioned Syria and Egypt but you didn't mention Israel which is a key U.S. ally, and over three decades they've been very dependent on you and you never seemed to manage them to join the convention but you think you can convince countries like Syria to ratify. Explain the rationale behind this. And would you like Israel to join?

Assistant Secretary Rood: On universality, of course it means what I said. The United States is seeking universal membership in the BWC. That's our policy. So certainly any state that is not currently a States Party we would like to see and we are encouraging to become a states party to the BWC.

I wouldn't say there's anything more complex about our policy position than that. We are seeking universal membership in the BWC.

With regard to your first question, are there additional details that I wish to provide on the activities of Iran, North Korea and Syria and their biological weapons efforts. I think that's something where the statement speaks for itself. I'll leave it where that statement stands. We typically don't discuss intelligence matters in public and provide that sort of evidence, but I think it's clear from the statement what we believe and I think I'll just leave it at that.

Question: Can I jump in and ask a question? Is the August 2005 Noncompliance Report available publicly? And do you know if it's on the State web site, for example?

Assistant Secretary Rood: Yes, it is. We do a very comprehensive Noncompliance Report every year to the U.S. Congress. It is available on-line and it details in some greater detail what our views are. Not just on the Biological Weapons Convention but other arms control agreements.

Question: I'm just curious about in your last paragraph of your statement here where you talk about the Conference possibly being hijacked by the destructive agenda proliferated. I wonder if you could give a little bit of what precisely you had in mind.

Also, Anan mentioned, Secretary General Kofi Anan mentioned today in his speech an idea which he'd announced earlier this year, about widening the fight against biological weapons to include some new forum which went beyond the Convention to bring together scientists and government ministers and things. I wonder what the US view on that is.

Assistant Secretary Rood: I have the Secretary General's remarks here. What are you referring to? Can you guide me to the passage that you think --

Question: I haven't got it in front of me, but he says, there's some reference to this forum. He mentioned it back in May I think. He said there was a need for a wider, that the Convention itself wasn't enough.

Assistant Secretary Rood: As I read his call, I think he was making a point that we agree with. I think the passage you're speaking about is he says, "We should no longer view the Convention in isolation as simply a treaty prohibiting states from obtaining biological weapons. Rather, we must look at it as a part of an inter-linked array of tools designed to deal with an inter-linked array of problems." Is that it?

Question: He does talk about "a forum" which is, anyway, if you don't know what it is then you obviously haven't got any reaction to it.

Assistant Secretary Rood: My immediate reaction is I think the Secretary General's statements that there is an inter-linked array of tools that are required, and we shouldn't think of the BWC in isolation. I would associate myself with that, I agree with that. There are a number of steps we would need to take and the Biological Weapons Convention isn't the 100 percent solution.

I think the other efforts that he was talking about, if I'm reading him right. Obviously I've not talked to him directly about it, "efforts encompassing public health, disaster relief, and efforts to ensure the peaceful uses of biological science and technology can safely reach their potential," is what the Secretary General says in his remarks. I think there as well, we have proposed a set of activities that we think can help promote peaceful uses of science for biology in ways that are meaningful to advance the goals of the Biological Weapons Convention.

The four agenda items that I set out -- disease surveillance, improved biosecurity, national enforcement, and preventing the misuse of research we think have a number of important benefits that they will provide for us.

So I think again, based on my read of the Secretary General's remarks and I was in the Chamber when he delivered them, I think the sorts of activities we just discussed are things that we in the United States support.

Question: The hijacking?

Assistant Secretary Rood: Oh, yes. I think we've put forward what we think is a constructive and positive agenda and we would like other countries to assume a similar posture and a similar spirit for the discussions here today.

There are some tired old ideological debates from the past that we would prefer that countries leave aside and instead focus on being constructive here. So there are some issues which it's certainly possible with a number of countries being present that some might raise, but we are trying to from the outset focus countries on a constructive, positive agenda and to tell them not to get dragged into these divisive debates that have bogged down similar conferences in the past.

Question: John [Darakowski]. I was wondering if there are other countries that you have concerns that might have conducted offensive biological weapons programs given the defense community thinks there's more than a dozen out there. And what is your definition between the terms of reference for demarcating between offensive and defensive biological weapons research? Thank you.

Assistant Secretary Rood: I think we, as I mentioned in my statement, we have particular concerns with the activities of North Korea, Iran and Syria. Again, it's because of their activities in the biological weapons context, but also because of their activities outside that context such as the support for terrorism and their lack of compliance with international obligations. Those things are related. They come together. They are part of what informs our concern.

There obviously are other issues, and as I mentioned in my speech we've had discussions bilaterally and multilaterally with regard to concerns about compliance. It's something we take very seriously.

Your second question about the precise demarcation line between offensive and demarcation work. I think we see offensive work as R&D, production, other activities that are aimed at having a capability to use these for offensive purposes as a weapon of war. Defensive purposes, we would say, are things like research for prophylactic

capabilities, defensive capabilities. For example we in the United States have a defensive effort to ensure that should biological weapons be used against our people or our forces that we would have some capability to protect ourselves against that. That's all fully permissible, defensive work under the BWC, and it's important.

Question: If I can have a follow-up. Would that include bioengineered biodefense?

Assistant Secretary Rood: I'm sorry, say that once more.

Question: Would that include bioengineered biodefense research?

Assistant Secretary Rood: Is there something in particular you're getting at there? Could you elaborate more?

Question: [Inaudible].

Assistant Secretary Rood: I see. Okay. As I said, I think if we're talking about efforts to defend ourselves, to protect our forces against biological agents, those are efforts that are defensive in nature and are permitted by the BWC. That's the demarcation line we would use to apply to whether it's research area A, B, or C.

Moderator: Thank you, Mr. Rood. Thank you all. We'll get a transcript out to you all as soon as we can. Thank you for coming, and again, sorry we were late.

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 [BACK TO TOP](#)

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