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COMMISSION ON PHYTOSANITARY MEASURES

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**Written reports from international organizations - Biological Weapons
Convention (BWC) Inputs**

Agenda item 16.2

Prepared by Biological Weapons Convention (BWC)

English only

**BWC-ISU SUGGESTED INPUT TO THE
MEETING OF THE COMMISSION ON PHYTOSANITARY MEASURES**

A. Biological Weapons Convention: Activities during 2021

1. Each year from 2018 to 2020, States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) have convened a two-day Meeting of Experts on Assistance, Response and Preparedness (MX4), in the framework of the BWC intersessional programme (ISP).¹ This topic relates to efforts to strengthen the operationalization of Article VII of the BWC, pursuant to which States Parties undertake to provide assistance in case of the use of biological weapons. The Secretariat of the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) has been officially invited to attend BWC meetings in the past in order to strengthen collaboration and enhance information exchange on this important aspect.

2. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, BWC-related meetings had to be postponed. The yearly Meetings of Experts, including MX4, were eventually held from 30 August to 8 September 2021. The 2020 Meeting of States Parties eventually took place from 22 to 25 November 2021 in Geneva. At this meeting, BWC States Parties, taking into account the extraordinary circumstances imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, exceptionally decided that the Ninth BWC Review Conference, originally planned to take place in 2021, would take place in Geneva from 8 to 26 August 2022. On 20 December 2021, therefore, the Preparatory Committee for the Ninth Review Conference held its first session in Geneva to consider the agenda items on the organizational aspects of the Review Conference. Assistance, response and preparedness issues will be addressed at the second session of the Preparatory Committee in the context of the agenda item on ‘comprehensive consideration of all provisions of the Convention’, and will take into account the discussions held during the 2018-2020 intersessional programme.

3. At MX4, there was broad recognition of the need to make progress towards the operationalization of Article VII. While noting that the Convention lacks an operational mechanism to prepare, provide and coordinate assistance to a requesting State Party pursuant to Article VII, BWC States Parties also highlighted the potential coordination role of the United Nations, with the help of States Parties and appropriate intergovernmental organizations, including the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) in the event that Article VII might be invoked. Under the agenda item on “Exploration of means to prepare for, respond to and render assistance in case of the possible hostile use of biological agents and toxins against agriculture, livestock as well as the natural environment”, the US introduced a working paper² which described lessons learned in international cooperation and assistance from an agricultural incident. Questions were raised from States Parties in this regard, which revolved around customs control mechanisms, current e-commerce regulations and assessments concerning bio- and sanitary safety. Additionally, some delegations informed about similar incidents and other relevant threat scenarios in their countries, while suggestions were made for mitigating those threats including through an offer on regional cooperation.

4. In the ensuing discussions, various delegations pointed out to the need to strengthen preparedness and response capacities concerning the hostile use of biological agents and toxins against agriculture, livestock and the natural environment. In this regard, the criticality of strengthening national capacities was stressed, together with the importance of international cooperation and enhancement of existing capabilities, as well as the fostering of a permanent dialogue between the BWC and other relevant international organizations. Several States Parties urged that more attention should be paid to this topic in any future intersessional programme and they suggested to agree upon appropriate language at the upcoming Ninth Review Conference.³

¹ The 2018-2020 intersessional programme consisted of annual Meetings of States Parties over four days, which were preceded by five thematic annual Meetings of Experts with a total duration of eight days.

² See BWC/MSP/2020/MX.4/WP.4: Lessons Learned in International Cooperation and Assistance from an Agricultural Incident - Submitted by the United States.

³ See BWC/MSP/2020/MX.4/2, dated 14 October 2021, Annex I, Summary report - Submitted by the Chairperson of the 2020 Meeting of Experts on Assistance, Response and Preparedness.

5. Between May and June 2021, France and India, with the support of the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU), conducted a series of three webinars with a view to supporting deliberations among States Parties at MX4 on their proposal towards the establishment of an Article VII assistance database by the Ninth Review Conference.

6. During 2021, the ISU also continued its work related to ensuring effective coordination among relevant offices, department and funds of the United Nations, including humanitarian actors, to support States in their response to a deliberate disease outbreak with financial the support from Canada.⁴ The “International Bio-Emergency Framework for Deliberate Events” developed pursuant to United Nations Secretary-General’s 2018 disarmament agenda is currently being developed into an overarching guidance framework for the UN system in the context of the United Nations Biorisk Working Group (UN-BRWG) in cooperation with relevant entities from the UN system, including the IPPC Secretariat. Recognizing the need to improve internal UN coherence and to strengthen interagency cooperation in the light of emerging biological threats in a globalized world, the UN-BRWG was established on 20 August 2020 by the UN Secretary-General’s Executive Committee. The UN-BRWG is co-led by UNODA and the World Health Organization.

⁴ BWC/CONF.VIII/4, Final Declaration, Article VII, para. 39.