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Building Partnerships for Biological Threats Prevention, Preparedness and Response

Remarks

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International Conference on Health and Security

Washington, DC

September 5, 2012

As Delivered

Thank you Ambassador Kennedy, distinguished Ambassadors, delegates, and colleagues.

As you know, President Obama is committed to creating an unprecedented level of transparency and openness in our own Government and working together with our partners in the Open Government Partnership, to ensure greater transparency, accountability and effectiveness in governance. Transparency also is the word of the day in numerous arms control and nonproliferation initiatives we are collectively pursuing to build a foundation of trust and confidence.

Likewise, this International Conference on Health and Security is a key step in the implementation of the Bio-Transparency and Openness Initiative that Secretary Clinton announced this past December at the Seventh Biological Weapons Convention Review Conference.

This Initiative includes a series of steps the United States is taking to demonstrate our support for the Convention and its tenets, because we recognize that the biological threat to global security is as pressing as that posed by nuclear and chemical weapons.

In her remarks at the Review Conference, Secretary Clinton underscored our commitment to building an environment of openness and collaboration in our biodefense enterprise and outlined the planned activities for this Initiative. One such activity was a tour of United States Government biodefense facilities, in order to offer direct insight into our programs. The goal was to help to build understanding and confidence in our defense work and further demonstrate our commitment with respect to biological threat preparedness and response.

I am pleased to report that the tour took place on July 24th at Fort Detrick, Maryland. It provided a clearer picture of how the many parts of the U.S. Government contribute to our biodefense programs and presented a new window for our guests into how we collaborate with each other and our international partners for the benefit of the public at large. It is our impression that in addition to the tour, briefings provided by the Departments of Defense, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security and Agriculture on the scope of our biodefense efforts were also well-received by the Ambassadors who participated. I believe, we achieved in our goal to remove misconceptions about ongoing research and showcase that our biodefense work is overwhelmingly open and public.

While we seek no reciprocity from our initiative, I do encourage all other countries with biodefense programs to follow this example in order to facilitate greater understanding and transparency at their own facilities. We believe for the Biological Weapons Convention to remain a viable treaty, we must work together in a cooperative and transparent fashion to improve implementation of our obligations.

As we move forward we are going to have to think bigger and more boldly. In 2009, President Obama stated clearly in Prague that the United States was committed to seeking the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. With the understanding that this ambitious goal will take patience and persistence, and will not be reached in his lifetime, he boldly outlined concrete steps to create the conditions for this vision. Similarly, we all need to be making similar commitments to addressing emerging infectious diseases that still pose a huge threat to humankind and have the potential to disrupt our livelihoods. While we work to defend against the threat of biological risks that may be posed by terrorists or state-based bioweapon programs, we need to start thinking seriously about the connections between global health and security and how we work to mitigate potential threats in both arenas. That's why this Conference is important. We are

here to build partnerships for biological threat prevention, detection, preparedness and response, regardless of whether the cause of an outbreak is natural, accidental or of malicious intent.

With this in mind, the United States commends the ongoing synergies and convergence between the BWC and other international public health organizations and security regimes like those of the World Health Organization and UN Security Council Resolution 1540 in recognition of the interconnection of biological weapons with other biological risks. As the World Health Organization works towards establishing an effective global network for disease surveillance, for example, we acknowledge that more needs to be done to avoid impact on global health security. In recent years, we have experienced some serious disease events, in which it took weeks or even months to learn the true cause of the outbreak and from where it originated.

Today, we pledge to continue to work with the international community to make certain that surveillance of human, animal, and plant diseases is integrated, in order to be vigilant in our response on a global scale. At the same time, we call on Member States to join us in taking the appropriate steps to move towards that common objective of sharing relevant information which can foster better insight on current and emerging infectious risks.

In closing, it is important to recognize that in today's interconnected world, infectious diseases are not bound by political borders. Infectious diseases can and will find ways to challenge current measures of prevention, detection and containment of disease outbreaks. That is why we invited diplomatic, health and security communities from around the world to this Conference. We all need to cooperate to minimize the risk of disease being used as a weapon. It is our intention under the Bio-Transparency Initiative to expand further dialogues and engagements in the near future to other areas such as research in the life sciences and biotechnology to help us reduce this risk. For it is only when we work together can we see the bigger picture and respond effectively as these challenges evolve.

Thank you.

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