



Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) Meeting of States Parties

Statement by Dr. Bernard Vallat,

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Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, and thank you Ambassador Delmi for inviting me here today.

I would like to use this opportunity to highlight how the World Organisation for Animal Health, the OIE, can work with the BWC towards common goals, and to explain why strong, well-governed veterinary services lie at the heart of preventing animal pathogens from being used as biological weapons directed against humans, animals or both.

As an intergovernmental organization the OIE shares a common membership with BWC. Of the 178 OIE Member Countries, 157 are also members of the BWC.

I am sure that you don't need reminding about the impact of animal pathogens on human health, agriculture, economies, and the availability of safe food. Because of these impacts animal pathogens have been used as bioweapons throughout history, from a time when archers dipped their arrows in rotting animal carcasses, through to 20th century biowarfare programs, and more recently, attempts by terrorists to use animal pathogens against civilians.

Most bioweapons have utilized animal pathogens. Agents such as anthrax plague, glanders, and foot and mouth disease virus don't just exist in laboratories; many of them are also freely available in nature.

Diseases such as SARS, H5N1 bird flu and HIV remind us that most human diseases have their origins in animals. So it is critical that animal health and human health sectors continue to work together in the spirit of 'one health'.

An infectious disease outbreak follows the same course irrespective of how it was initiated, whether it was a natural event, a laboratory accident or a terrorist attack, and the mechanisms to detect and control outbreaks are the same.

The most effective way to limit threats from animal pathogens is to strengthen existing animal and human health systems for surveillance, early detection and rapid response which are there to deal with everyday outbreaks of infectious diseases. I am relieved to see that this message is now widely accepted by members of the security community as well as in other fora such as G20 and Global Partnership.

The OIE is responsible for setting the international standards for animal health, including zoonoses, quality of Veterinary Services and for veterinary legislation. Since 1924, all OIE Member Countries have been legally obliged to report significant animal disease events to OIE, in addition to the main notifiable animal diseases, so that OIE can alert all countries across the world to take action to prevent further international spread. Now all OIE Member Countries are connected to an OIE specific server for that purpose, called WAHIS.

The animal health sector took the lead in establishing a legal framework for global infectious animal disease control because OIE standards were in place long before the human health equivalent, IHR, had been conceived by the WHO.

Because infectious animal diseases travel so fast without stopping at country borders, weaknesses in one country's Veterinary Services threaten the whole international community. Unfortunately, today many National Veterinary Services are weak due to years of underinvestment and poor governance. OIE is working tirelessly to address this and make sure that all of its members are progressively able to meet international standards on quality.

Because implementation of OIE's standards will help the BWC to meet their goals I would urge you to provide high-level political support worldwide to encourage greater compliance with them, by using any possible international and national channels that promote global security.

The battle against infectious disease has no end. Pathogens will continue to evade the tools that have been developed to control them. New pathogens will emerge without warning and efforts to predict their impact remain challenging. Scientific research is still necessary to develop effective strategies to maintain the fight against infectious disease. To create unnecessary regulation or barriers to scientific innovation would be very dangerous. For this reason OIE strongly supports Article X of the BWC.

Animal diseases continue to restrict the availability of affordable, safe food; and food security goes a long way to ensuring social stability. Alexandre Dumas recognized in the 19th Century that 'any society is only three square meals from a revolution'.

Veterinary services play an important role in stabilizing society because they protect healthy and productive agriculture, which contributes to poverty alleviation.

On the subject of food security, I would like to conclude with some words about rinderpest. This disease was arguably the first agro-weapon, brought to Europe by Moghul invaders in the 13th century. One of the most devastating diseases of livestock, also known as cattle plague, rinderpest was responsible for decimating cattle populations across Asia, Europe and Africa. This led to food shortages; which in some areas turned to social unrest.

In 2011, after decades of international effort the OIE declared the world to be free from rinderpest; only the second disease to have been eradicated, after smallpox in humans. To prevent its reoccurrence, OIE Member Countries signed up to a Resolution which commits them to either destroy remaining stocks of virus or safely store them in one of a very few laboratories approved by OIE and FAO.

18 months after the declaration of global freedom, rinderpest virus is still held in dozens of laboratories worldwide.

There is no reason for countries to keep stocks of rinderpest; the disease is eradicated and the virus has no commercial or research value.

Those who keep the virus have a heavy burden of responsibility; an accidental release would undermine decades of investment and effort. It would be a huge embarrassment to the country responsible, with potentially devastating impacts on livestock.

I urge members of the BWC and Member Countries of the OIE to ensure that this disease never resurfaces. You can do this by putting pressure on countries' administrations to destroy remaining rinderpest virus or to ensure that it is transferred to an approved reference laboratory.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the BWC for its ongoing support and most positive collaboration, as we work towards the common objective of reducing biological threats. The BWC's collaboration and outreach has been so successful thanks to the enthusiasm, commitment, and competence of the ISU. I would also like to recognize the support that OIE has received from several BWC countries in helping to build global capacity for stronger animal health and veterinary public health systems.