

World Organisation for Animal Health (the OIE) opening statement

Biologic and Toxin Weapons Convention, Seventh Review Conference

December 2011

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and thank you Mr Chairman for this opportunity to make some opening remarks on behalf of the Director General of the World Organisation for Animal Health, the OIE. The OIE is an intergovernmental organisation, predating the United Nations it was founded in 1924 to respond to animal disease at a global level. In 2011, the OIE is made up of 178 Member Countries, and has the mandate to improve animal health, veterinary public health and animal welfare world-wide.

Animal diseases including zoonoses continue to have a significant impact on public health, animal health, food safety, food security, the environment and economies. Owing to their impact and because they are cheap, easy to acquire, propagate and smuggle through borders, animal pathogens make ideal bioweapons. Biotechnological advances mean that these agents can be readily engineered to be more dangerous than they are in their natural state.

OIE believes that 'day to day preparedness against ordinary disease outbreaks offers the best protection against unusual, deliberate, and accidental releases' and that investments in existing mechanisms to prevent and respond to natural disease events are sustainable and effective in reducing unnatural threats whilst providing significant benefits for rural economies and developing countries.

2011 has been a very important year for the OIE and its veterinary partners. On May 27 at the OIE General Session in Paris an official declaration of world-wide freedom from rinderpest was adopted by all OIE Member Countries. The disease was once the bane of livestock farming, decimating populations of cattle and transport oxen as it swept across Asia, Europe and Africa. Historically, rinderpest virus has also been developed and used as a biological weapon. Rinderpest was the trigger for establishing the Veterinary Profession and in 1924 the OIE. It is only the second time after smallpox that an infectious disease has been eradicated by man, and this is thanks to the sustained and concerted efforts of a diverse group of national, regional and international partners.

A world which is free from rinderpest infection in livestock presents the Veterinary Services with new challenges. Remaining stocks of rinderpest virus must be secured safely and vigilance must be maintained in case the virus reemerges or is released as a result of malicious action or accidental laboratory escape. The OIE, together with its international partner agency the Food and Agricultural Agency of the United Nations (FAO), is moving forward in implementing post rinderpest eradication activities. These include ensuring that remaining stocks of virus are sequestered in a small number of approved high containment facilities; that there is oversight and regulation of any further research activities involving rinderpest virus; and that the international community remains vigilant to the possibility of any future reoccurrences of the disease. Before the end of this year the OIE and FAO will have appointed an independent Joint Committee which will provide oversight to these activities. During 2012 work will start on implementing these actions.

2011 also saw the development of OIE's strategy on global bio-threat reduction; strengthening global biosecurity. The OIE's strategy focuses on strengthening, enhancing, and developing cross-links in existing health systems. It focuses on close collaboration with OIE's international partners including the WHO, the BWC and the Global Partnership. A draft has been circulated for your interest.

The OIE would like to express its thanks to the BWC as its partners for the ongoing support and collaboration to the activities of the OIE, and to the Implementation Support Unit for the outstanding work that it has done in organizing the seventh review conference and all of the inter-sessional events.

The OIE wishes you a successful conference and hopes that the outcomes will further strengthen the BWC's role in supporting the OIE in its central role to continue to reduce threats from animal pathogens.