

Thursday 10th November 2016

Conclusion of the general debate and start of the Committee of the Whole

The third day of the Eighth Review Conference of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) saw completion of the general debate and the first convening of the Committee of the Whole (CoW). Many delegates arrived in the morning looking tired having been following the results of the US election overnight. At the start of the afternoon, the Conference received a briefing on financial issues from UN officials as the backlog of contributions to bodies such as the BWC is threatening the sustainability of activities.

General debate, right of reply and NGO statements

The morning started with a statement from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). This constituted the last statement of the general debate, although the President of the Review Conference, Ambassador György Molnár of Hungary, announced that he would be flexible if any delegation wished to make a general debate statement later.

Rights of reply were used by Syria and Russia; the former wanted to respond to remarks relating to alleged use of chemical weapons that had been made during the general debate; and the latter wanted to respond to remarks by Ukraine that biosafety arrangements in that country had been affected by the loss of a laboratory that is in territory no longer under Ukrainian government control.

Statements by non-governmental organizations were given in the following sequence: University of Bradford; University of London; Biosecure Ltd; VERTIC; Pax Christi International; International Network of Engineers and Scientists; Biosecurity Working Group of the InterAcademy Partnership; Research Group for Biological Arms Control, Hamburg University; University of Sussex; International Office for Innovation in Reducing Crime (IOIRC); ITHACA; International Federation of Biosafety Associations (IFBA) and Bradford Disarmament Research Centre; UPMC Center for Health Security; Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA); Center for Nonproliferation Studies; Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs; Global Emerging Pathogens Treatment Consortium (GET); and Green Cross International.

The Committee of the Whole

After the NGO statements, the CoW was convened, with Ambassador Michael Biontino of Germany taking the Chair. Following a procedural briefing before lunch, the CoW started a 'first reading' of the article-by-article review during the afternoon using the text from the Seventh Review Conference as a reference point, reaching Article VI. The first reading is intended to allow a compilation of suggested changes without lengthy discussion. Once the compilation has been put together, a 'second reading' can be carried out with the advantages and disadvantages of the various suggestions being discussed.

Further general debate themes

The analysis here draws on statements made on the three days of proceedings. This examination of themes follows on from that in the previous daily report.

Most statements made some reference to the Implementation Support Unit (ISU), with many expressions of thanks for the work it had done. There was no suggestion that its mandate should be allowed to lapse. In terms of the scope of its mandate, some suggestions were made in areas which it might expand its role, which would have resource implications. The issue of the geographical spread of the past and current staff was raised as well as in the context of potential expansion of staffing numbers. There was wide recognition that the tasks allocated to the ISU would have to be linked to any new inter-sessional process and the scale of activities such a process was likely to produce.

On the inter-sessional process, it was clear that most states expected that there would be some form of review of scientific and technological (S&T) developments between Review Conferences. Few statements were specific whether they saw the S&T review as part of the formal inter-sessional process or as a parallel activity. The question of whether inter-sessional meetings should be able to take decisions was the subject of divergent views. However, there are different types of decisions – a decision by an inter-sessional meeting to add an agenda item to its discussion in the following year might be regarded by some as of a different character to a decision requiring commitments by states parties. A number of statements suggested that the Review Conference is the only body that can take decisions, others countered that this suggestion is not codified in any BWC document.

On verification issues, four broad categories of delegations can be observed, recognizing that there are many nuances and difference in emphasis within these categories. There is the perspective that traditional forms of verification are of limited effectiveness in the biological realm and so a verification arrangement for the BWC is not worth pursuing. The most vocal proponent of this is the USA, although specific verification issues were not referred to in its statement on Monday. A second category would like to see some form of verification, but sense political difficulties and so are not sure what to do next. This category hardly raises the issue in public. There is a further category that wants a verification arrangement, but as the time does not seem right that this could be successfully negotiated suggests it is worth examining other options to build confidence in compliance and provide experience of exchange of information. Statements made this week elaborating this sort of position included those by the EU and by Turkey. The fourth category includes those who express desires to start negotiations on verification arrangements as soon as possible. This category is very vocal and tends to see other compliance confidence options as a distraction from a clear goal that a legally binding instrument is the optimum way to strengthen the Convention. Statements elaborating this sort of position included those from Venezuela/NAM and from Russia.

Side events

Five side events were held on Wednesday. Two at breakfast: one, convened by the University of Pittsburgh, was entitled ‘Safety and Security of Synthetic Biology’, with the other convened by the Hamburg Research Group for Biological Weapons Arms Control on ‘Open Source Information for Transparency Building - Launch of an Online Information Tool: The BWPP BioWeapons Monitor 2.0’. Three events were held during the lunch break: convened by the IOIRC, entitled ‘The OPBW- Is it Time?’; by the Russian Federation, entitled ‘Operationalizing mobile biomedical units to deliver protection against biological weapons, investigate their alleged use and contribute to the suppression of epidemics of various origin: Presentation of draft decision’; and by King’s College London, University College London, Sussex University and Switzerland, consisting of a launch of a book ‘Biological Threats in the 21st Century’ and presentation of the ‘Understanding Biological Disarmament’ project.

This is the fourth report from the Eighth BWC Review Conference. These reports have been produced for all official BWC meetings since the Sixth Review Conference in 2006 by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). They are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>> and <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>>. A subscription link is available on each page.

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