

Tuesday 15th November 2016

First cross-cutting plenary: Article X and science & technology

The first day of the second week of the Eighth BWC Review Conference started with an informal plenary looking at two issues: cooperation and assistance (Article X and related issues) and science and technology (S&T) review which continued into the afternoon. The Committee of the Whole (CoW) then continued its second reading of the article-by-article review, working into the evening. Questions were raised about whether the informal plenaries should be open or closed.

President's introduction

Introducing the day's proceedings, the President of the Review Conference, Ambassador György Molnár of Hungary, summed up the week of activity so far; saying the atmosphere was 'relatively positive' and urged delegations to be flexible in their work towards the outputs of the Conference. He reminded delegates of the words of Kim Won-soo, United Nations Under Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs on the opening day: 'I hope this Conference will take the necessary decisions to lead the way over the next five years in pursuit of a world safer and more secure for all.'

The President announced the appointment of an additional facilitator, Ambassador Hernán Estrada Roman of Nicaragua, who will be working on Article III.

Cross-cutting plenary

The first part of the cross-cutting plenary was chaired by Zahid Rastam of Malaysia as facilitator on 'Assistance and cooperation'. The session started with a briefing from the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) on the operation of the Assistance and Cooperation Database (commonly referred to as the Article X database) and the sponsorship programme. The database currently has 61 offers made by 8 states parties plus 1 group of states parties and 23 requests from 6 states parties. The number of offers significantly increased during 2016. The ISU noted the database had not been used as extensively as had been hoped. On sponsorship, the ISU noted a significant increase in activity. For the inter-sessional period, the number of sponsored attendees never reached double figures for any one meeting. For the August Preparatory Committee meeting, 32 participants from 25 states parties received assistance in their attendance through the ISU. The equivalent figures for the Review Conference are 45 participants from 34 states parties.

Venezuela spoke to the NAM proposal for an Action Plan, as contained in WP.23, which would include a mechanism for 'full, effective and non-discriminatory implementation' of Article X and which also suggests the establishment of a cooperation committee. One aspect that has been the subject of significantly divergent views is the proposal that any Article X mechanism should include arrangements to review denials of export licences. This is opposed by many Western countries. China and Pakistan highlighted their joint proposal, contained in BWC/CONF.VIII/PC/WP.32, for a 'non-proliferation export control and international cooperation regime' to be established under the auspices of the BWC and intended to overcome some of these divergences.

Many delegations highlighted projects that promoted activities such as vaccine production, disease surveillance or development of new medical treatments and which took place outside of the framework of the BWC.

At the change of subject matter, Laurent Masmejean (Switzerland) took the Chair as facilitator on ‘Science and technology’. There was a broad commonality of views on the need for improved S&T review, although Brazil and Iran suggested there was no need for a specific structure to review S&T developments.

A number of views were expressed on membership, with some preferring an open arrangement which all states parties could participate in while others preferred a panel or committee. A method of selection of members would be needed for a review body not open to all states parties. A number of delegations suggested that whichever membership model was selected, there could be additional temporary working groups on specific issues. Various views were expressed about whether the review body should be funded by the individual states parties that provide experts, or whether it should be funded from general BWC funds. Recognition was given to the possibility of sponsorship or assistance to experts from states with fewer resources.

Numerous delegations noted that a functioning S&T review process would need additional resources for the ISU, with many suggestion the Unit would need a dedicated officer to support the S&T review process.

The status of informal plenaries

The openness of informal plenaries was questioned. During the lunch break, one delegation, Iran, raised with the Bureau the question of whether NGOs and other participants who were not delegates of states parties should be in the room during the informal plenaries. Under the rules of procedure, a single delegation can push the meeting to a closed status. This meant that the last half hour or so of the informal plenary was held behind closed doors. NGOs returned to the room at the start of the Committee of the Whole which has been open this year, as in 2011. As there had been no announcement, just a notification to NGOs from the conference staff, most delegates in the room were unaware of what had happened. At the time of writing, it is not clear what will happen on Tuesday.

Closing the informal plenaries would be a rolling back of past practice as all of the informal plenary meetings at the Seventh Review Conference were open to registered NGOs. These were distinct from the informal consultations held in the plenary meeting room which, following long-established practice, were held behind closed doors in 2011.

Proceedings of the Committee of the Whole

Once the informal plenary on S&T review was completed, the CoW was convened with Ambassador Michael Biontino of Germany taking the Chair. This spent about two hours on its work during the afternoon and then continuing into the evening without interpretation for over three hours. Articles V through X were considered. Very rarely was any change adopted. As with Friday, some similarities in proposals were eliminated. Positions taken by delegations were broadly in line with those taken at earlier meetings.

Side event

One side event was held on Monday at lunchtime, convened by France, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique and UNIDIR under the title ‘Implementing Article VII of the BTWC: Challenges and Opportunities – Lessons Learned from a Tabletop Exercise (TTX) on the Implementation of Article VII of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention’.

This is the seventh report from the Eighth Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC). 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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