

Friday 5th December 2014

The fourth day: universality, the ISU and preparing the report

Thursday at the 2014 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) opened with Myanmar (Burma) taking its seat as a State Party for the first time, represented by Deputy Foreign Minister Thant Kyaw. The scheduled work for the day was discussion of efforts to promote universal membership of the Convention, the annual report of the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) and preparations for the report of the Meeting.

Universality

The Chair of the Meeting, Ambassador Urs Schmid of Switzerland, introduced his report on universalization activities, which had been published as an official document before the MSP, and noted that an addendum with updated information would also be published.

He announced that Myanmar had deposited its instruments of ratification on Monday, bringing the number of States Parties to 171. The depositary governments, Russia, UK, and USA, took the floor in turn to welcome the new member. Myanmar made a brief statement and noted the government had been ‘undertaking political, social and economic reforms’ and had been examining its treaty obligations. The Deputy Minister said ‘we are a non-possessor state of all WMDs’ and noted his country had ‘virtually completed’ domestic procedures to ratify the Chemical Weapons Convention.

The Chair then noted he had been informed that Angola, Andorra and Mauritania had taken specific steps towards joining the Convention. Iran (for the non-aligned), USA, Mexico, India, Argentina, Netherlands, Australia, China, Republic of Korea, Pakistan, Spain, France, Iran (national) and Italy each took the floor. Delegations welcomed Myanmar to the ‘BWC family’; phrases such as ‘significant development’ were used and hopes expressed that this would set a good example and encourage others to join. Delegates expressed appreciation for the Chair’s report and thanked him for his efforts to encourage universal membership, which was seen as a priority.

Report of the ISU

The ISU introduced its annual report which had been circulated previously. The report contains information the activities of the ISU, but also details of national points of contact and of submission of CBMs. The report noted the ISU had been operating with reduced staffing for much of 2013. Mexico, USA and Pakistan each took the floor to raise points.

Preparations for the final report of the meeting

MSP report drafting usually takes place in two parts, procedural and substantive. The draft procedural parts are normally circulated on Wednesday or Thursday, are factual, describing the practical aspects of convening the Meeting (when it met, who had what roles, etc), and are usually uncontroversial. This year, these have not been circulated yet but this is not a concern. The parts that are subject to discussion are the substantive sections.

This year a text of ‘draft elements’ had been circulated as document L.2 prior to the MSP, earlier than had been previous practice. This had been welcomed by most delegations as it provided a starting point for discussions and suggestions about what should be in the final report. An updated text relating to the three standing agenda items had been circulated late on Wednesday afternoon (CRP.1) and an updated text relating to the Article VII (the biennial topic) section was circulated to delegations on Thursday morning (CRP.2).

The afternoon session started with a request from the Chair for general comments from delegations on the drafts. The first to take the floor was Cuba, suggesting that there was no mandate from the Seventh Review Conference for papers such as L.2, CRP.1 and CRP.2 to be circulated as such documents ‘prejudged’ the outcome of the meeting. The next delegation to take the floor was India with a simple question relating to when the Chair wished to receive specific suggestions relating to his texts; this question implicitly assumed the validity of the documents. The delegations of the USA, UK, Iran, Russia, Australia, Netherlands, France, China, Spain, Germany, Pakistan, Canada, Algeria and Italy each took the floor, some for more than one intervention, none of which questioned the validity of the documents. A number of delegations suggested a paragraph-by-paragraph review of the drafts would be useful. As is usual at this stage, some delegations saw the text as balanced between the agenda items and some as unbalanced.

A new text combining the earlier drafts with some additions of text from the 2013 MSP report was circulated late in the afternoon session. The Chair asked for general comments on a section-by-section run through. India, Cuba, Iran (national), USA, Russia and China provided comments but lack of time prevented proceeding beyond the first section.

In order to make further progress, a relatively small group of delegates met late into the evening in informal consultations in a side room which continued until 10.10pm. The delegations in the consultations tasked the Chair and the ISU with providing a new draft for the morning based on the exchanges that had taken place.

There has been a regular pattern of evening consultations on the Thursday of the MSP for some years, and so on one level this seemed fairly routine. However, brief discussions with some delegations seemed to indicate that there was a greater divergence of perspectives within the consultations than had been apparent in previous years.

Side events

Three side events were held on Thursday; one at breakfast and two in parallel at lunchtime. The breakfast event was convened by the United States on ‘The Global Health Security Agenda, International Response to the Ebola Outbreak, and Their Relevance to the Biological Weapons Convention’. Introductory remarks were given by Ambassador Robert Wood (USA). Presentations were given by: Beth Cameron (USA), Ambassador Päivi Kairamo (Finland), Isabelle Nuttall (World Health Organization) and Dominic Porter (EU).

One of the lunchtime events was convened by Germany and Tunisia on ‘Biosecurity - Biorisks - Bioethics’. Presentations were given by Rym Benkhalifa (Pasteur Institute, Tunisia), Mohamed Kouni Chahed (Pasteur Institute Review Board, Tunisia), Silja Vönecky (University of Freiburg, Germany) and Kathryn Nixdorff (Darmstadt Technical University, Germany). Introductory remarks were given by Ambassador Michael Biontino (Germany) and closing remarks by Ambassador Walid Doudech (Tunisia). The other was convened by France on ‘A Peer-Review Mechanism for the BTWC: Feedback of the Pilot Exercise and Follow-up’. The exercise was outlined by Tiphaine Jouffroy (France) and personal reflections on their involvement were given by Anna Zmorynska (Germany), Cédric Invernizzi (Switzerland), and Christopher Park (USA). The event was chaired by Louis Riquet (France).

This is the fifth report from the Meeting of States Parties for the Biological Weapons Convention being held from 1 to 5 December 2014 in Geneva. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) and are available via the BWPP website at <<http://www.bwpp.org>>. The author can be contacted during the Meeting of States Parties on +41 76 507 1026 or <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.