

Monday 5th December 2011

The Seventh BWC Review Conference: setting the scene

The Seventh Review Conference of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) provides the opportunity for a full review of the purposes and provisions of the BWC, taking into account relevant scientific and technological developments.

The Conference will follow the Provisional Agenda agreed by the Preparatory Committee in April. This draft agenda, together with the draft programme of work have been circulated to States Parties by Ambassador Paul van den IJssel (Netherlands), the President-designate of the Review Conference. These documents have also been published on the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>. Other Conference documents will also be posted here; official documents (those that start BWC/...) can also be obtained from the UN documents server <<http://documents.un.org>>. The BWPP daily reports from the 2006 Review Conference, the subsequent annual meetings in 2007 through 2010, and the PrepCom are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>>.

Organization of the Seventh BWC Review Conference

The Conference is scheduled to start with a video message from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and then to meet in general debate for two days. It is then scheduled to enter into an article-by-article review in the guise of the 'Committee of the Whole' (CoW). Towards the end of the middle week of the Conference, the 'Drafting Committee' is expected to be convened to translate the work of the Conference into a final report and declaration. The Chair-designate of the Committee of the Whole is Ambassador Desra Percaya (Indonesia) and the Chair-designate of the Drafting Committee is Counsellor Judit Körömi (Hungary).

Issues relating to the Seventh BWC Review Conference

Issues that may be raised at the Conference fall within a number of headings: the ISU and its future; the most recent inter-sessional process and what may follow on from it; advances in science and technology (S&T); the peaceful uses of the life sciences; Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), compliance/verification; and universality.

The ISU, established in 2006, is seen as having had a positive impact and so far there have been no suggestions that its mandate not be renewed. In considering this mandate beyond 2011, the Conference is likely also to consider whether it should be kept to three staff as at present and whether its mandate might be redrafted. The past inter-sessional processes – the programmes of annual meetings that happen between recent Review Conferences – have both been seen as successful, with some feeling the second, post-2006, was more productive. There will also be discussions about whether this form of approach is optimum and whether there might be modifications, such as having on-going working groups, allowing more flexibility in deciding the topics to be discussed each year or allowing the annual meetings to make decisions or recommendations to be followed by States Parties. The changing S&T context, and in particular the rapid advances in the life sciences, can lead to changes in the nature of risks and threats the regime should counter, as well as providing new opportunities

for peaceful uses. The issue of access to the life sciences for peaceful purposes is covered by Article X of the Convention and is seen as part of a bargain in which the renunciation of biological weapons and the control of the hostile uses of the life sciences has to be implemented in such a way as to allow for unhindered use of the life sciences for peaceful purposes. There is a divergence of opinion between States Parties about what Article X really means and whether further implementation of it is required. The system of CBMs under the Convention provides for returns to be provided by States Parties on certain relevant activities and facilities. While numbers of returns have been rising, there has been wide recognition that participation in CBMs could be improved further and perhaps that their scope could be redefined. This might, for example, be a specific topic for a meeting in a follow-on inter-sessional process. Compliance/verification is perhaps the most divisive collection of issues, with some States Parties supportive of the implementation of new legally binding measures while others remain implacably opposed. The membership of the BWC stands at 165, with the addition of Mozambique and Burundi during 2011. This level of membership is lower than in the comparable nuclear and chemical treaties.

Conference documents already circulated

Before the opening of the Review Conference, 8 background information documents and 22 working papers had been formally issued as Conference documents and were available on the ISU website, together with the annual report of the ISU (BWC/CONF.VII/3). Three further working papers were only available as unformatted 'advance copies'.

The background documents relate to: the history and operation of the CBMs (BWC/CONF.VII/INF.1); compilation of information from States Parties regarding compliance (INF.2); new relevant S&T developments (INF.3 contains information from the ISU and INF.3/Add.1 contains information from States Parties); developments in other relevant international bodies (INF.4); additional understandings and agreements reached by previous Review Conferences, listed by article (INF.5); common understandings reached during the 2007-2010 inter-sessional process (INF.6); status of universalization [prepared before the accession of Burundi] (INF.7); and implementation of Article X (INF.8).

Of the working papers, seven relate to options for possible future inter-sessional processes (UK, BWC/CONF.VII/WP.1, 2, 10; Australia/Japan/New Zealand, WP.11; Australia/Japan, WP.12; South Africa, WP.18; and USA, WP.23); and six relate to Confidence-Building Measures (Belgium, WP.6; Germany/Norway/Switzerland, WP.9; Germany, WP.14; South Africa, WP.19; Norway/Switzerland/New Zealand, WP. 21; and Canada, advance copy). Two papers deal with ISU issues (South Africa, WP.17; and Japan, WP.22); two relate to the process of review of relevant scientific and technological developments (India, WP.3; and Australia/Japan/New Zealand, WP.13); and two relate to implementation of Article X (South Africa, WP.16; and Cuba/NAM, advance copy). Other papers covered the following topics: convergence between biology and chemistry (Poland, WP.4); BWC implementation (Iraq, WP.5); biorisk management standards (Belgium, WP.6); biothreat preparedness (Finland, WP.8); a proposal for an 'Intersessional Bureau' (Germany, WP.15); and strengthening the effectiveness of the Convention (China, advance copy). Further working papers are expected to be issued during the Review Conference.

As can be seen from the topics chosen, there are common threads running through many of the contributions of these various States Parties. Similar problems are identified and similar solutions are proposed. While the papers on related themes, such as the follow-on inter-sessional process or CBMs, may have some differences in emphasis, there are no substantial contradictions between them. However, later papers may raise other issues.

This is the first report from the Seventh Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 5 to 22 December 2011 in Geneva. The reports are designed to help people who are not in Geneva to follow the proceedings. Copies of these reports and those from the earlier meetings are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>>. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). The author can be contacted during the Conference on +41 76 507 1026 or <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.