

Tuesday 6th December 2011

Sinterklaas and statements: the first day of the Review Conference

The Seventh Review Conference of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) opened on Monday morning, as scheduled, with Ambassador Paul van den IJssel (Netherlands) preparing for his role as the President of the Conference. However, the morning started with a pleasant surprise for delegates as 5th December is a special day in the Netherlands – the celebration of *Sinterklaas*. A traditional gift for those celebrating Sinterklaas is a chocolate letter and delegations arrived to find a large chocolate letter on their desks that was the initial of the name of their country.

Administrative proceedings

The Conference started with the routine administrative decisions such as the adoption of the agenda, the programme of work, and the rules of procedure. The position of Ambassador Van den IJssel as President of the Conference was formally confirmed, as were those of the Chairs of the committees. Ambassador Eric Danon (France) and Ambassador Gancho Ganev (Bulgaria) were appointed as Vice-chairs for the Committee of the Whole, chaired by Ambassador Desra Percaya (Indonesia), and Dr John Walker (UK) and Mr U.L.M. Jauhar (Sri Lanka) were appointed as Vice-chairs for the Drafting Committee, chaired by Counsellor Judit Körömi (Hungary). Mr Mário Duarte (Portugal) and Mr Vipul (India) were appointed as Chair and Vice-chair, respectively, of the Credentials Committee. [The role of Credentials Committees at inter-governmental conferences is sometimes perceived as a simple, if perhaps boring, administrative process. However, there is an important purpose in checking that those present and participating in decision making have the relevant authority to be doing so. Without confidence in that authority there might, one day at some conference on some subject, be doubt in the legitimacy of the decisions.]

Initial presentations

Following the decisions on administrative arrangements, the Conference activities started with a video message from the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, followed by presentations from two scientists. While the UN Secretary-General has either spoken in person to earlier Review Conferences or transmitted a message in written form, this is the first time a video message has been used. The two scientists presenting were at contrasting stages in their careers – Professor Indira Nath from India is co-chair of a committee overseeing an international project on Science Responsibility and Research Integrity and Esther Ng from Singapore is a PhD student studying at the University of Oxford and the winner of an essay competition. Both spoke of the need for the responsible conduct of science and for practising scientists to be more involved in promoting the norms embodied in the Convention.

The BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) has indicated it will place the video message and the two scientists' statements on its website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>.

General Debate

The general debate provides the opportunity for States Parties to make plenary statements in public session. Where copies of statements or presentations have been provided by those who delivered them, the ISU will place these on its website. Statements were made in the morning (in the following order) by Cuba (on behalf of the NAM States Parties to the BWC), Kazakhstan, Belarus (on behalf of the Collective Security Treaty Organization [CSTO]), Burundi, Mozambique, France, Germany, India, United Kingdom, Ukraine, Malaysia and China. Statements after lunch were given by Turkey, Serbia, Spain, Russia, Bulgaria, Canada (on behalf of the 'JACKSNNZ' – [an informal grouping of Japan, Australia, Canada, Republic of Korea, Switzerland, Norway and New Zealand]), Switzerland, South Africa, Norway, Mexico, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Romania, Indonesia, Costa Rica, Philippines, Denmark, Brazil and Peru. The United States, which normally endeavours to speak on the first day of Review Conferences, did not make a statement as the US contribution to the general debate will be made by Secretary of State Clinton on Wednesday. Also scheduled for Wednesday is a speech by the Foreign Minister of the Netherlands. Some of the speeches made on Monday were made at Ministerial level, such as those by the United Kingdom and by the Russian Federation. Corridor discussions indicated that many delegates were pleased that the Review Conference was attracting attention at this political level.

With a number of further statements to be made in the general debate on Tuesday, it is perhaps too early to try to identify themes or common threads as it there may be an element of chance as to whether the States Parties interested in a particular aspect happened to all speak on one particular day or another. A notable feature was the level of detail in the Cuba/NAM statement. In earlier BWC Review Conferences, the opening NAM statement has normally been phrased in much more general terms with detailed NAM positions on relevant aspects being developed over the following few days. This implies that the NAM states are much better prepared collectively than at earlier Review Conferences.

New working papers

Three working papers were made available in official versions during Monday. A paper on possible approaches to education and awareness-raising among life scientists was issued in a revised form and so now carries the number BWC/CONF.VII/WP.20/Rev.1. Two of the papers that had previously only been available as advance versions were circulated as official documents with the paper by Canada on Confidence-Building Measures becoming WP.25 and the Cuba/NAM paper on implementation of Article X becoming WP.26.

Side Event

One side event was held at lunchtime on Monday, hosted by the ISU, Switzerland and the UK, although it had three purposes. The first was to open an art exhibition of microbes modelled in glass by the artist Luke Jerram. The second was the formal presentation of a copy of the BWC Briefing Book (prepared by Caitríona McLeish and Richard Guthrie with financial support from the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office [FCO]) by FCO Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State Alistair Burt to Ambassador Van den IJssel – electronic copies of the book are available from <<http://www.bwc2011.info>>. The third was the award of the prize to Esther Ng for her entry in the Young Scientist Essay Contest which had been run by the ISU in collaboration with the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK. The prize was awarded by Mr Burt and details of the competition, together with a copy of the winning essay, can be found at <<http://tinyurl.com/bwc-essay>>.

This is the second 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>>.

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