

Friday 9th December 2011

Industry and Posters: the 4th day of the Review Conference

The Seventh Review Conference of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) continued on Thursday with a panel of industry representatives, further article-by-article review, a second thematic informal plenary and a poster session.

Industry panel

The day's proceedings in the main conference room began with an informal session consisting of a panel of representatives of industry, chaired by the President of the Review Conference. This panel followed on immediately from the industry side event in the breakfast slot. The panelists were Gary Burns (AstraZeneca), Patrick Scannon (XOMA LLC) and Huanming Yang (BGI). The informal session provided the opportunity for delegates to hear industry perspectives and to pose questions to the panel.

Article-by-article review / Committee of the Whole

This review is being carried out by the Committee of the Whole with Ambassador Desra Percaya (Indonesia) in the Chair. This started after the industry panel and dealt with Articles V and VI, although there was a brief return to some Article IV issues. As with the session on Articles I to IV on Wednesday, the aim was to do a first run through each Article.

The Article V discussion was focused on the system of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs). There was a wide recognition that participation could be improved and that the aim should be to make participation universal. A key question was how to maximise the value of the CBM processes while keeping the effort required to prepare CBM submissions to a minimum. Debate on how the CBM system might be revised is scheduled to be carried out in an informal plenary. The Article VI discussion had as its dominant theme the UN Secretary-General's Investigative Mechanism with some delegations wanting to make use of this mechanism if there were an allegation of use of biological weapons while others wished to see a BWC-specific arrangement created.

Second informal plenary – inter-sessional process

The subject under discussion in the informal plenary on Thursday afternoon was the inter-sessional process, and in particular what activities should be included in any plan of work. In the Sixth Review Conference the discussion had been focused primarily on the topics that might be discussed. At the Seventh Review Conference, there is a wider reaching discussion about whether other forms of work might be adopted, including new arrangements for the inter-sessional meetings.

Key starting points for the discussion were the working papers by the UK (WP.1, WP.2, WP.10), Australia/Japan/New Zealand (WP.11), Australia/Japan (WP.12), South Africa (WP.18) and the USA (WP.23). As with the informal plenary on Wednesday, the aim of the session was not to come to any immediate conclusions, but to encourage discussion.

While the high level of participation in the inter-sessional process was welcomed, some notes of caution were raised that if any new programme of activities had a larger number of meeting days this might overload some States Parties, creating an advantage to larger states that could commit resources to be able to actively participate in them all. At least one call was made for the new programme of work to include negotiations on a verification protocol. As to whether there should be new structures in the form of working groups on specific subjects there were few strong feelings with some delegates noting the real issues in such a change might lie in the details. Discussion was far more focused on the whether the power to take decisions and make recommendations should be only for Review Conferences or whether the inter-sessional meetings could also take decisions.

Poster session

A poster session, consisting of 13 posters from a variety of sources, was held after the end of the day's meetings. Posters were an eclectic mix, from the Inter-Academy Panel to Pax Christi to the US Department of State team responsible for CBM submissions. This kind of session was first carried out in a BWC context during the 2008 Meeting of Experts and so this is the first time it has been done at a Review Conference.

Conference documents

The two new official documents have been circulated. Further submissions by States Parties on compliance with BWC obligations are published in BWC/CONF.VII/INF.2/Add.1 and INF.3/Add.2 contains further submissions on new scientific and technological developments.

Side Events

Four side events were held on Thursday – two in the breakfast slot and two at lunchtime – a record for a BWC conference or meeting. One of the breakfast events was on 'Industry Perspectives on Implementation of the Biological Weapons Convention', convened by the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO), the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) and the Global Agenda Council on Nuclear Biological and Chemical Weapons of the World Economic Forum. Presentations were given by Craig F Steinman (Abbott Molecular), Jacob T Cohn (Bavarian Nordic), Patrick Scannon (XOMA LLC) and Gary Burns (AstraZeneca). The event was co-chaired by Phyllis Arthur (BIO) and Amy Smithson (CNS). The other breakfast event was on the 'Virtual Biosecurity Center' <<http://virtualbiosecuritycenter.org>>. The presentation was given by Kelsey Gregg (Federation of American Scientists).

One of the lunchtime events was convened by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) which included the launch of the 2011 BioWeapons Monitor (BWM) <<http://www.bwpp.org/publications.html>>. The panel was introduced by Noel Stott. Presentations were given by Iris Hunger on the BWPP project on the Review Conference <<http://www.bwpp.org/revcon.html>> and by Richard Guthrie on the daily reports. Authors of three of the BWM country studies – Kenya (Margaret Muturi), Japan (Masamichi Minehata) and South Africa (Bilkis Omar) – presented the results of their research. The other event was convened by the delegation of the United States on the US Biodefense Program. An introduction was given by Ambassador Laura Kennedy and presentations were given by Thomas Countryman (Assistant Secretary for International Security and Nonproliferation, Department of State), Daniel Gerstein (Deputy Under Secretary of Science and Technology, Department of Homeland Security), George Korch (Senior Science Advisor, Department of Health and Human Services).

This is the fifth 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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