

Friday 16th December 2011

Committee of the Whole: an increase in momentum

The Seventh Review Conference of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) continued on Thursday with the focus on the work of the Committee of the Whole which met in the main conference room in both the morning and the afternoon with some facilitated consultations in between.

The rate of progress in the Committee of the Whole increased from the slow pace of Wednesday, but concerns were raised that there would not be sufficient time for the Review Conference to complete its work if the pace of Wednesday had continued. A meeting of the Bureau (the general administrative committee of the Conference) was held during the lunch break to consider the matter.

During the afternoon, the President of the Review Conference, Ambassador Paul van den IJssel (Netherlands), resumed the plenary in order to provide an update on how he saw the ongoing programme of work for the Conference. He noted that 22 December was a very hard deadline and there would be no chance to use negotiating practices such as 'stopping the clock' as the Palais des Nations would be closing that night for Christmas. Not only would there be no interpretation services but also no basic services either.

The President indicated that the Committee of the Whole report would be presented on Friday morning, first to the Committee itself and then to a Conference plenary meeting. In addition to this, he announced that he would also circulate his first draft of the forward looking part of the final document on Friday morning. This would then allow for a consideration of these two parts together for the first time. Facilitated consultations would continue and the focus of the work would be in plenary sessions. A new indicative programme of work would be issued on Monday.

Some of what the President announced follows the practice adopted in 2006 for the Sixth Review Conference. In that case, the Drafting Committee was never convened. Instead the drafting work was carried out under the oversight of the President himself. In 2006 the President was Masood Khan (Pakistan).

Article-by-article review / Committee of the Whole

The second reading of article-by-article review continued in the Committee of the Whole with Ambassador Desra Percaya (Indonesia) in the chair. The text being considered was the document circulated on Wednesday bearing the reference BWC/CONF.VII/COW/INF.2, together with some amendments circulated by Iran.

On Wednesday, States Parties had gone through parts of the draft document paragraph by paragraph, which had led to the discussion being focused on detail and hence very slow progress. An alternative approach was adopted for Thursday in which delegations considered the text for each article as a whole. This was of particular benefit as there is a significant amount of duplicated text under each article because of the compilation of various proposals. Discussing articles as a whole rather than specific paragraphs in turn allowed delegates to indicate what they wanted the broad thrust of text for that article to reflect.

While there was still disagreement on a number of points, the Committee was able to consider most of the text in the article-by-article review. The intention was to be able to get sufficient views on the Wednesday draft in order to provide a Chair's 'best guess' draft of what might be a text that is broadly acceptable to all delegations. Syndoph Endoni (Nigeria) and Reto Wollenmann (Switzerland) reported back on their informal 'Friend of the Chair' activities to try to reach consensus on particular paragraphs.

Facilitated consultations

The work of the three facilitators appointed to hold informal consultations continued during Thursday. Each of the issue areas includes topics on which it will be difficult to reach consensus, hence the need for consultations. The three facilitators – Paul Wilson (Australia) on Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) forms, Zahid Rastam (Malaysia) on review of scientific and technological developments and Gary Domingo (Philippines) on cooperation and assistance – are understood to be continuing with their consultations after the President's first draft of the forward looking part of the final document has been released.

Conference documents

A working paper from France entitled 'Un mécanisme de revue par les pairs pour la CIAB' [A peer-review mechanism for the BTWC] has been issued as BWC/CONF.VII/WP.28. An unofficial English translation of this paper is available in the 'Advanced copies of papers' section of the Implementation Support Unit's Review Conference website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc/7rc>>. A revised version of Iraq's paper has been circulated as WP.5/Rev.1 although the revisions seem to have been typographical. A paper by the European Union on 'Implementation of Article X of the BTWC – some illustrative contributions' has been issued as INF.10. Some minor corrigenda have also been issued.

Side Events

Two side events were held on Thursday – one in the morning and one at lunchtime. There was also an informal networking event held at lunchtime.

The morning event was convened by the US National Academy of Science (NAS) and launched a report entitled 'Biosecurity Challenges of the Global Expansion of High Containment Biological Laboratories' <http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=13315>. Presentations were given by Alison Hottes (NAS), James Le Duc (University of Texas Medical Branch) and Sergiy Komisarenko (Ukraine). The event was chaired by Benjamin Rusek (NAS).

The lunchtime side event was convened by the delegation of Belgium on the subject of 'Biological Weapon Convention, Biosecurity and the Industry' which detailed the results of a seminar in June on the management of biological risk (including proliferation) in life science institutions. The panellists were Werner Bauwens (Belgium), Frank Meeussen (Belgium), Ursula Jenal (Jenal & Partners Biosafety Consultants), Jean Pascal Zanders (EU Institute for Security Studies) and Marc Thunus (Belgium). A report exploring the possible contribution of biorisk management standards to the goals of the BWC has been published by Egmont, the Belgian Royal Institute for International Relations, in cooperation with the EU Institute for Security Studies <<http://www.egmontinstitute.be/papereg/ep52.pdf>>.

The other lunchtime event was not a formal side event of the Review Conference. The delegation of the Philippines hosted an informal networking event for delegates in relation to the Manila 'super week' series of conferences which had been held in 2011, focusing on BWC-related issues in the south-east Asian region.

This is the tenth 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>.