

Tuesday 20th December 2011

Start of the Third Week: slow progress and a late proposal

The Seventh Review Conference of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) started its third week on Monday with the circumstances becoming more challenging and the number of working days available rapidly diminishing. The President of the Review Conference, Ambassador Paul van den IJssel (Netherlands), appealed for delegates to focus only on the key issues as time was valuable and noted 'we have to make the best use of every minute'. Some informal consultations went on into Monday evening and there is a chance that there will be evening meetings on Tuesday and Wednesday in order to try to meet the hard deadline of the end of the Review Conference on Thursday.

In an effort to make progress on the inter-sessional process, Ambassador Van den IJssel, announced on Monday morning that he had appointed Ambassador Jo Adamson (United Kingdom) and Ben Steyn (South Africa) as joint facilitators on the issue.

Financial issues

A significant underlying theme of the day's proceedings was the question of cost. Even within States Parties that have been very supportive of increasing the activities under the auspices of the BWC there are budgetary pressures that make a substantial increase in the financial cost of the BWC over the coming five years very difficult. Part of the problem is that the cost of running BWC activities has been relatively small and that funding for increases in activities as suggested in the President's paper circulated on Friday, while not large sums themselves, come out as a relatively large percentage increase. For some delegations it is hard to go back to their country's financial authorities and request that sort of an increase for a single international instrument. Moreover, other international arrangements such as the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons – the body established by the Chemical Weapons Convention – have seen a real-terms cut in their budgets.

Inter-sessional process / programme

A major focus of discussions on Monday were the issues regarding the structure and topics of the follow-on inter-sessional process (often now being referred to as the inter-sessional programme or ISP) under the new facilitators. Two sessions of these informal consultations were held, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, each lasting about one and a half hours. These consultations, like the other facilitated consultations, were held behind closed doors and so are more difficult to report on.

The morning session of the consultations allowed for an exchange of views in the new forum. The joint facilitators attempted to bring forward some middle ground ideas in the afternoon session, recognizing areas of concern such as the costs of the number of days of meetings in Geneva. One element of the exploration for the middle ground was a suggestion that seven working days be allocated to the annual Meeting of Experts and three days to the Meeting of States Parties. This would keep the total of working days at ten, the number for the most recent ISP, as opposed to the total of fifteen in the President's paper from Friday.

At the same consultation session a new proposal was put forward by five countries which also put a limit on the number of working days at ten, but retained five for each of the meetings. It also proposed some contentious topics for the annual meetings. The proposal created some frustration in other States Parties; not so much for its contents, but for its timing. Had the proposal been made in the first week of the Conference it would have been regarded in the same way as other position papers putting forward ideas that would be subject to discussion, with the recognition that not all elements of the proposal would be acceptable to all States Parties. The timing of the proposal, being introduced in the phase of the Conference in which time to find common ground is at a premium, drew some adverse response. When the informal plenary resumed after this session the atmosphere was distinctly tense.

Forward-looking section

In between sessions of the facilitated consultations there were informal plenary meetings that were used by the President to keep delegates informed about how he was adapting the programme of work of the Conference and to have discussions on issues in the forward-looking section of the draft Final Document not directly related to the ISP. The issues chosen for discussion in the plenaries were sponsorship and fellowships, universality, assistance databases, and assessed contributions.

On sponsorship of participants at meetings and the creation of fellowships, both seen as tools to build capacity in developing countries, the key question related to whether funds for these should come from assessed contributions or from voluntary contributions. The majority of delegates contributing to the discussion indicated a preference for voluntary contributions for these purposes. There were also suggestions that other training opportunities should be sought to enhance capacity building.

On universality, it was noted that the text mostly derived from that of the Sixth Review Conference and that an emphasis had been placed on regional efforts during this Conference. Questions were also raised about what might be the best way to report back on universalization activities.

The assistance databases are part of the efforts to match assistance requests to assistance providers. This was the first topic discussed after the afternoon ISP consultations and many States Parties indicated that they were not opposed to a database as a matter of principle, but that its adoption would have to be part of a balanced package.

One proposal in the draft Final Document is for all States Parties to the BWC to pay for the costs of meetings and the Implementation Support Unit rather than the existing system whereby only those States Parties that attend the meetings pay towards the costs of the BWC. This was not opposed by any delegate that participated in this discussion. A second question was whether assessed contributions of less than 0.02 per cent of the total BWC budget not be collected. For the existing budget, this apparently relates to contributions by some 20 states which each pay less than US\$400 per year. It was suggested that below this threshold it becomes uneconomic to collect these sums. Some States Parties raised questions about whether this would set a difficult precedent in other international arrangements.

Side Events

One side event was held on Monday, at lunchtime – the last scheduled side event of the Review Conference. It was convened by the delegation of Poland on the subject of ‘Biosafety and Biosecurity: implications of the convergence of biology and chemistry’. Panellists were Cezary Lusinski (Polish delegation in Geneva), Janusz Kocik (Military Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology, Poland) and Maciej Karasinski (Polish delegation in The Hague).

This is the twelfth 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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