

Tuesday 8th November 2016

The Conference gets underway: opening statements and Rubik's Cubes

The Eighth Review Conference of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) opened on Monday morning with the adoption of a number of administrative decisions, a video message from the UN Secretary-General, a message in person from his representative and the gift of a Rubik's Cube to each of the delegations.

Opening formalities

The Review Conference was opened by Kim Won-soo, United Nations Under Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs who presided over the formal appointment by acclamation of Ambassador György Molnár of Hungary as President of the Conference.

In his opening remarks, the newly elected President noted that there was a growing interest in the BWC, giving as an example that 2016 had seen the highest number ever of returns under the system of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) returns. The level of sponsorship of experts to assist in their attendance at the Review Conference was 'unprecedented' with over 40 experts sponsored. The sponsors were Australia, Canada, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the European Union. He also noted that, by coincidence, this week was International Week of Science and Peace with Thursday being World Science Day for Peace and Development.

Formal decisions taken included: adoption of the agenda, the programme of work, and the rules of procedure [together with understandings relating to interpretation]; and decisions on attendance by non-signatory states [Guinea and Israel], attendance by international organizations, and the appointment of a number of office holders such as Vice-Presidents of the Conference and various committee posts. Such decisions may seem very dry and dull, but it is difficult to have a successful Review Conference unless the legitimacy of the process is firmly established.

Messages from the United Nations

Before the general debate started, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon gave a short video message. He said: 'States parties need to grapple with the growing risks of a biological attack', adding: 'The deliberate release of a biological agent would be a global health and humanitarian catastrophe. Yet there are glaring gaps in our ability to both prevent and respond to this nightmare scenario.' He also spoke of the dual-use nature of the problems being examined, encouraging states parties 'to address the vital question of how to promote advances in life sciences that benefit all humanity, while safeguarding against their use for malicious purposes'.

The video message was followed by an address from Under Secretary-General Kim. He suggested there were four gaps in the efforts to control biological weapons. The first was a 'universality gap' as 19 states are not BWC parties. The second was an 'implementation gap' as many states had not fully implemented the provisions of the

Convention at a national level. The third was a 'response gap', highlighted by lessons learned from the Ebola outbreak in west Africa. The fourth was an 'institutional gap' owing to the BWC being a 'skeleton operation' compared with other disarmament measures. He questioned whether two weeks of meetings each year were sufficient to deal with the range of issues covered by the Convention; whether a three-person Implementation Support Unit (ISU) was enough to deal with the work required; and whether the financial model to support BWC activities was adequate.

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 the BWC website. Statements were given in the morning (in the following order): Hungary, Venezuela (for the non-aligned states), Iceland (for Nordic states), Japan (for the G7 Global Partnership states), Belarus (for the Collective Security Treaty Organization [CSTO] states), Canada (for the JACKSN states, an informal group of Japan, Australia, Canada, Republic of Korea, Switzerland and Norway), USA, Sweden, Morocco, Iraq, UK, Serbia, Japan (national), and the United Arab Emirates. Statements after lunch were given by: Brazil, Spain, Nepal, Russia, Kuwait, Germany, Belarus (national), Cuba, China, Holy See, Philippines, Republic of Moldova, Australia, France, Bulgaria, the Netherlands, Mexico, Pakistan, Belgium, Malaysia and India.

A wide range of issues were raised and, in broad terms, there was little change from previously expressed positions. An exception to this was that some delegations expressed more detailed positions relating to the review of scientific and technological (S&T) developments. However, it is too early to try to identify themes or common threads as the list of speakers is barely half way through and it seems the statements will fill Tuesday and possibly continue into Wednesday. Thus reporting on general debate themes will be held over to a later daily report.

There were notable features of some of the statements given on Monday. Hungary, represented by Minister of State Istvan Mikola, compared the work to come in the Review Conference with the challenge of solving the Rubik's Cube, a famous invention from his country, hence the gift of a cube from the Hungarian Presidency to each delegation. Venezuela outlined the elements relating to the BWC that were contained in the final document of the Margarita Island summit of the Non-Aligned Movement that was held in September; this was the first BWC statement that Venezuela had given as NAM convenor. The JACKSN statement was the first since New Zealand ceased being active in the former JACKSNZ owing to logistical issues. One sentence in the US statement prompted a number of comments in the corridors: 'If we fail to come to consensus this month, it will not damage this Convention' [with emphasis in the posted text on the 'not']. The UAE spoke of its National Committee on Biosecurity that is coming to the conclusion of a four-year programme of work. Nepal's statement was the first it had given since becoming a state party only the week before.

Side events

Two side events were held on Monday, both at lunchtime. One was convened by Germany, entitled 'The Wiesbaden Process - Enhancing the Role of Industry in Combatting the Proliferation of WMD'. The other was convened by Disarmament Dynamics, entitled 'Civil Society Briefing: Understanding the BWC Eighth Review Conference'.

This is the second report from the Eighth BWC Review Conference. These reports have been produced for all official BWC meetings since the Sixth Review Conference in 2006 by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). They are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>> and <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>>. A subscription link is available on each page.

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