

Friday 11th November 2016

Committee of the Whole: first reading completed, second reading anticipated

The fourth day of the Eighth BWC Review Conference started with an announcement by the President, Ambassador György Molnár of Hungary, that Guinea had deposited its instrument of accession with London on Wednesday, making it the 178th state party to the Convention. The morning saw completion of the first reading of the article-by-article review by the Committee of the Whole (CoW). The afternoon saw a hesitant start to the second reading.

As it was the World Science Day for Peace and Development, the side events had a science theme. It was also a special day in which those permanently accredited in Geneva were allowed to bring their children to the Palais des Nations; this reduced the average age of people in the meeting room.

Proceedings of the Committee of the Whole

The CoW was convened with Ambassador Michael Biontino of Germany taking the Chair, it picked up from the previous day's work, starting with Article VII, using the text from the Seventh Review Conference as the reference point. This first run-through was completed by late morning.

The aim had been to start the second reading in the afternoon. As consolidated texts for Articles I to VI had not all been ready before the scheduled start of the proceedings, the afternoon meeting of the CoW was adjourned for an hour. Once this set of compilations were put on the BWC website by the ISU and circulated in the room in hard copy, the CoW reconvened. However, some delegations suggested they would benefit from having more time to consider the compilations of proposed changes. Others suggested that it would be difficult to consider only some of the articles as it was not clear when the compilations for the remainder of the articles would be available.

The meeting of the CoW was therefore adjourned, with the anticipation that the second reading would start on Friday. By late evening, the compilations for all of the articles had been put on the website.

While the delays in getting momentum behind the work of the CoW might be frustrating in the light of the scale of the rest of the work to be done within the Review Conference, it is the opposite problem to that which happened in 2006. At the Sixth Review Conference, the CoW raced ahead in its first couple of days and then had to revisit the Articles that had been previously run through as some delegations claimed that they had not been prepared enough on the earlier days and wanted to examine numerous new suggested issues and revisions.

Committee of the Whole process issues

All review conferences are individual events and have slightly different methods to do their work. Most multilateral treaties have some form of review process; with so many treaties in existence, there are many review conferences. If ever there had been procedural arrangements that were shown to be more effective than any other, these would promptly be

adopted across a broad range of treaties. This has not happened, and thus there remains many different ways of organizing a Review Conference.

The CoW process chosen for this Review Conference, following consultations with states parties, was explained by Ambassador Biontino on Wednesday. He described the CoW as the ‘machine room’ of the BWC ‘ship’. He said his three guiding principles were transparency, inclusiveness and efficiency. On transparency, he stated that all negotiating documents would be available on the website before discussion. On inclusiveness, he stated his intention that all meetings would be open-ended. On efficiency, having noted that there were a variety of papers from earlier Review Conferences, from the inter-sessional process, and Working Papers introduced this year, he suggested using the text resulting from the article-by-article review at the Seventh Review Conference as the reference point.

He proposed that a first reading would compile all the suggestions for changes into one document. The second reading would have a full discussion of all suggested changes and identify which suggestions could be better placed in the forward-looking decisions and recommendations section of the final document. This would be followed by a third reading that would be focused on narrowing differences of positions. He noted that this would have to be on the principle that ‘nothing is agreed until everything is agreed’, including with the decisions and recommendations section. As the third reading would be unlikely to resolve all differences, he recognised that he might, at the end, have to put together a Chair’s text to try and find an acceptable balance between the positions – such a Chair’s text could be used as a negotiating draft – a tool to facilitate consensus. He warned delegates that there was limited time for all of these processes and so that there could be late sessions to get through the work needed.

The implication of this procedural briefing on Wednesday was that the second reading could be used to rapidly agree uncontentious suggestions and consolidate some of the suggested changes where there is more than one similar proposal. This would produce a much more easily understandable text that would make the third reading considerably easier.

Side events and poster session

Five side events were held on Thursday. Two were held at breakfast: one, convened by Switzerland, entitled ‘Update on Two Workshops at Spiez Laboratory: Building a Network of Analytical Biological Laboratories and Examining Science and Technological Developments in the Area of the Convergence of Biology and Chemistry’; and the other, convened by Canada, entitled ‘Global Health Security Agenda Biosafety and Biosecurity Action Package: Lessons learned and next steps for the implementation of the Action Package’. Three events were held during the lunch break: convened by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), entitled ‘Identifying Needs and Providing Tailored Solutions: The Experience of the National CBRN Action Plan’; convened by the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, the Global Emerging Pathogens Treatment Consortium (GET), VERTIC and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, entitled ‘Addressing the Biosecurity Governance Challenges Posed by the Ebola Epidemic’; and convened by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, entitled ‘Science Advice at the OPCW’.

A poster session was held after the day’s formal proceedings. Past practice has been that where electronic copies of the posters have been provided by the poster presenters these have been placed on the BWC website by the ISU.

This is the fifth report from the Eighth Review Conference of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC). 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.

The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie. He can be contacted during the Review Conference on +41 76 507 1026 or <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.