

Friday 20th December 2013

The final day: adoption of the report of the Meeting

Opening of the meeting

There were very few formal proceedings for the final day of the Meeting of States Parties (MSP) of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC). Most of the day was taken up in informal consultations on the text of the final report. The report was adopted very late, after the interpreters had finished.

The morning started with arrangements for the 2014 meetings. The Meeting of Experts (MX) will be held during 4-8 August and the MSP during 1-5 December. The Chair of the 2014 meetings will be current Vice-Chair Ambassador Urs Schmid of Switzerland. The two Vice-Chairs will be current Vice-Chair Ambassador Mazlan Muhammad of Malaysia and the current Chair Judit Körömi, the Special Representative for Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation of the Foreign Minister of Hungary, the first female Chair of a BWC meeting.

There were no side events on Friday.

Adoption of the report of the meeting

A new draft of the paragraphs of the substantive part of the report was circulated at the opening of the meeting in the morning. After the arrangements had been made for the 2014 meetings, the plenary was suspended in order to allow delegations to consult on the text. The Chair commented that this new draft was shorter than that adopted in the previous year and that she had received an 'abundance' of inputs into the new text. She noted that a restructuring of the text meant that delegates should look carefully as suggested amendments may not appear where they might have been expected.

The initial suspension of the meeting had been only for a couple of hours with an intention of convening again before lunchtime. This did not turn out to be possible. A few announcements were made during the afternoon indicating some progress towards agreement. At 5.25 it was announced that a new text was now in preparation. This was introduced to the meeting at 5.53. With little time to consider the draft before the interpreters left at 6.00 the final discussions had to be carried out in English. The report was adopted at 6.10 and the meeting closed just a couple of minutes later without the usual closing statements.

The final text contains very little detail in contrast to the proceedings of the MSP which were more detailed than in previous years. An informal (i.e., not formally typeset) copy of the report has already been posted on the website of the BWC Implementation Support Unit, <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>. The Chair noted that this might not be the best document, but it was the best available under the circumstances with the pressure on time.

Reflections

A conscious effort is taken in writing these daily summaries to report the facts and not give opinion. However, there are many times that the question is raised – 'so what do you think

about what happened?’ While the role of a commentator should be to try to report what is happening in an impartial manner, there are times that this style of reporting does not convey some of the atmosphere of meetings. The following are some personal reflections that do not necessarily represent anyone’s views other than the author’s own.

The clearest impression from this meeting is the difference in perspectives of what might be expected from the inter-sessional process. The 2011 Seventh Review BWC Review Conference is the source of the mandate for this inter-sessional process. The Conference met for 14 days and established a 4-year series of meetings that will meet for a total of 40 days. Surely that must mean that the Review Conference meant for the inter-sessional process to be able to develop some thinking further than what had been possible within the 14 days that the Review Conference was limited to. If not, what is the purpose of the annual meetings? While the political position of wanting to ensure that only the topics within the mandate established by the Review Conference are discussed within the inter-sessional process is logically consistent, the position of wanting to go no further than the Review Conference did in any topic area acts as a hindrance to real progress.

This question of purpose was brought into sharp relief by the coincidental timing of the release of the Sellström report into allegations of use of chemical weapons in Syria. This came out as the MSP was moving from its interactive proceedings into document negotiations. Recent events in Syria are a salutary lesson that even if the majority of countries have banned the use of a particular weapon there may be others willing to acquire them and use them. Hopefully nobody would use biological weapons but if they did, what would the reaction of the world be? We can take some indication from what happened with Syria and chemical weapons. The world looked at the track record of the Chemical Weapons Convention and its associated arrangements and institutions and concluded that the efforts to rid the world of chemical weapons were laudable. In the case of use of biological weapons there would be similar questions asked. Those questions would be pointed at the BWC and the delegates sitting in the annual meetings. People would say ‘what have you done? What have you achieved?’ Would it be a satisfactory answer to reply that so much time had been spent in haggling over words in a final document rather than encouraging effective action?

Thus, this MSP was a meeting of two parts. The statements and presentations of the first few days were very informative and allowed for a very useful exchange of ideas. The increased quantity of detailed information prompted a sense that the inter-sessional process has matured well. On the other hand, the difficulties of agreeing a meeting report that builds on a sequence of years of discussing the same topics prompted a much less positive sense. It is a routine tactic of negotiations for delegates to try to make others feel that reaching agreement would be difficult in order to encourage the others to be more flexible in their decisions on acceptable text. Therefore, while there will always be some in the room pessimistic about the chances of concluding a final report, delegates who have participated in a few earlier MSPs tend to see the process of agreeing the final report as time-consuming and unlikely to end in disagreement. However, there was a period on Friday afternoon this year that it really looked possible there might not be a report. The consequences of not adopting a report would have been political embarrassing but, as there are no decisions within the document, the practical consequences would have been limited.

The situation with time running out on Monday for NGO statements should not be repeated. An hour is allocated for this, as has been the practice for a number of years. There is a need for NGOs to deal with some of the issues amongst themselves, and in particular regarding timekeeping.

This is the sixth and final report from the Meeting of States Parties for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which was held from 9 to 13 December 2013 in Geneva. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). The reports are available via the BWPP website at <<http://www.bwpp.org>>. The author can be contacted via <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.