

Tuesday 15th December 2015

The 2015 Meeting of States Parties: opening statements

The last week of Meetings of the current inter-sessional process for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) was opened on Monday morning by Ambassador Mazlan Muhammad of Malaysia as Chair of the 2015 Meeting of States Parties (MSP). The widely-reported terrorism alert in Geneva meant a more visible security presence around the Palais des Nations but had no impact on the running of the meeting.

The day was dedicated to opening statements (a session known as the ‘general debate’). As so many delegations wished to take the floor, the informal plenary session for NGO statements was displaced and so will be rescheduled. A draft estimate of the costs of the Eighth Review Conference to be held in 2016 was circulated in the afternoon.

After the formal proceedings had concluded in the main meeting room, informal consultations were held for about 40 minutes behind closed doors in a side room on a non-paper issued by the Chair on elements that might form part of the report of the meeting. This form of informal consultation is now scheduled to be held for the next three evenings.

Opening of the Meeting

Formal decisions were taken, such as adoption of the agenda, programme of work and rules of procedure. During the item on the programme of work, Russia took the floor to suggest that methods of work in earlier meetings had not been optimum and to propose that a drafting committee be established to prepare the Report of the Meeting, as allowed for under rule 36, with the recognition that it could take time to elaborate a proposal that might gain consensus. The USA, Australia, UK and Germany indicated hesitation about such an arrangement, noting such a committee needed some preparation to put together. Each delegation taking the floor emphasised desires for a transparent process. Russia said it would not press the proposal further. In the end, the new method of working with informal consultations each evening may satisfy some of the concerns, although consultations behind closed doors are not so transparent to those who are not members of State Party delegations.

On other formalities, Guinea and Israel were admitted as observers, together with a number of international bodies. The Chair noted sponsorship was provided to assist participation [this will be covered in reporting for the Article X / capacity building session]. Concluding his opening remarks, the Chair noted there was a need to bring the results of the August Meeting of Experts (MX) into a ‘focused product’ and that there needed to be a greater emphasis on the ‘effective action’ part of the mandate of the MSP.

Opening statements

Statements were given by: Iran (for the non-aligned), Canada (for the JACKSNNZ [an informal grouping of Japan, Australia, Canada, Republic of Korea, Switzerland, Norway and New Zealand]), Ireland, Sweden, Russia, Malaysia, Germany, USA, China, Spain, Republic of Korea, India, France, Libya, Denmark, Iraq and Bangladesh during the

morning; with Thailand, Brazil, Pakistan, Morocco, South Africa, Finland, Jordan, Mexico, Italy, Cameroon, Bulgaria, Japan, Indonesia, Cuba, Algeria, Turkey, Burkina Faso, Netherlands, Iran (national), Australia, Ukraine, Argentina and Ecuador after lunch. A statement was also given by the European Union as an international organization. Where copies of statements are provided by those that gave them, these will be added to the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) website. To save duplication during the daily reports this week, themes relating to subject areas that have dedicated sessions later in the week, such as cooperation and assistance and national implementation, will be discussed in the reports for those days. Many issues raised were similar to those raised in the MX.

A number of common points were made. Many delegations noted that 2015 marks the 40th anniversary of the entry into force of the BWC. The new parties joining the Convention during this year, Andorra and Mauritania, were welcomed; this brings the total number of States Parties to 173. Important contributions that advances in the life sciences bring to public health and to economic development were noted, and major gaps in biotechnology capacities between the north and south were highlighted. Questions of balance between risks and benefits of advances in the life sciences were raised. Issues across a wide spectrum of biological risks were brought up – from deliberately induced disease by states or non-state actors to naturally occurring outbreaks. Many countries described efforts they had put into place in relation to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. A number of strands of activity that complement BWC issue areas were highlighted, such as the Global Health Security Agenda and the International Health Regulations, but none were suggested as a substitute for an effective BWC.

Interactions and cooperative actions across and between the groupings that have traditionally dominated BWC practice were highlighted, such as the Indian-US Working Paper on national implementation and an update to the Australian-Malaysian paper submitted to the MX. A number of delegations referred to a forthcoming update to a 2013 cross-regional ‘food for thought’ Working Paper entitled ‘Addressing modern threats in the Biological Weapons Convention’. Such cross-group activity was particularly emphasised with regard to preparations for the Eighth Review Conference.

Many statements spoke in support of some form of legally binding instrument, particularly one including verification and compliance, while others suggested that negotiations would be potentially problematic as there was no consensus on the issue. Russia indicated it was intending to introduce an update to its proposal for a new form of negotiations that would not include compliance and verification issues – an attempt to find areas where consensus might be achieved. This new Working Paper would be co-sponsored by Armenia, Belarus and China.

On Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), various comments were made about desires to improving the quantity of returns and the quality and relevance of the information provided. The JACKSNNZ statement suggested a proposal in 2012 for a step-by-step approach that would allow States Parties to start submissions with partial returns should be put forward to the Review Conference. Turkey noted its returns were now made public, and suggested others do the same.

Side event

There was one side event at lunchtime on Monday convened by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences and the US National Academies of Sciences on the topic of ‘Implementation in Action: Contributions of ASEAN Scientists and Scientific Organizations to the BWC’. This followed on from a workshop held on the Sunday before the MSP.

This is the second report from the BWC Meeting of States Parties, being held from 14 to 18 December 2015 in Geneva. These reports have been produced for all official BWC meetings since the Sixth Review Conference in 2006 by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) and are available via the BWPP website at <<http://www.bwpp.org>> and via <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>>.

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