

Sunday 1st May 2016

The Preparatory Committee concludes its first session

The Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) for the Eighth Review Conference of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) concluded on Wednesday with adoption of an interim report. Proceedings were concluded at lunchtime and were focused on procedural and administrative matters. The PrepCom will reconvene on 8 August.

Procedural matters

Some decisions seemed to cause no problems. For example, Ambassador György Molnár of Hungary was confirmed as President of the Review Conference (the decision regarding to him taken on Tuesday related only to his role as Chair of the PrepCom) as were the dates and duration of the Review Conference. Other decisions proved difficult to some delegations who explained they had no objection in principle to the decisions but had anticipated taking them formally in August. Therefore, the PrepCom 'reached understandings on recommendations for final adoption in August' for a number of issues. The interim report was relatively uncontroversial as it followed the relevant precedents.

An unprecedented total of 10 Background Papers had been requested from the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) for later this year. Three papers were suggested for removal from this list: on international organizations, universality, and science and technology (S&T) developments. There was little expression of interest to continue the international organizations paper as most information contained within it is readily available elsewhere. The paper on universality duplicates much of what is produced in the annual reports on the subject, but non-continuance was rejected as it might be interpreted as lowering the significance of the issue. No similar argument was put forward about the S&T paper and it was dropped. Corridor discussions with delegates suggested that they do not see this as lowering the significance of the issue, although it might be perceived as such from the outside. It would seem the format of the S&T paper, based mostly on national contributions, was not widely regarded as a useful tool. It was noted that national Working Papers also cover S&T issues; however, a number of interventions highlighted a need to ensure that language should not be a barrier to participation in BWC activities. A significant element of the cost of the Background Papers is translation into each of the official languages; Working Papers are distributed in the language of submission only.

The general exchange of views (reporting held over from *PrepCom report 2*)

As noted in the second daily report, some coverage of the general exchange of views was held over to this report. The S&T issues were previously covered.

Many delegations welcomed Côte d'Ivoire, the most recent new member of the Convention. As with other exchanges in BWC meetings there were many references to effective implementation, Article X issues and to desires for a legally binding instrument to strengthen the Convention.

Article VII was a much stronger theme than was seen in 2011, reflecting the prominence it had in the inter-sessional programme. Interactions with health security issues were noted, including a need for better response to disease outbreaks in general. References

were made to recent Working Papers, including those on an Article VII assistance database and on the process for requesting assistance. References were made to the UN Secretary-General's mechanism for investigation of alleged use of biological weapons; India called for an investigation mechanism within the BWC itself, owned by the States Parties. Russia elaborated on its offer of mobile laboratories.

The recently-completed inter-sessional process was noted as not having produced much common understanding or effective action – a point made in different ways by Iran and the USA, for example. Some delegations indicated that an ability to take decisions within the inter-sessional meetings would enhance their effectiveness, others were opposed to decision making outside of the Review Conference process.

Australia and the EU noted that they had made sponsorship offers to assist delegates to the Review Conference who might not otherwise been able to attend.

As with the S&T issues, a number of delegations noted that it was useful to identify where ideas have common elements as well as to identify differences so that common ground can be sought between now and November with a chance to examine these issues again during the August PrepCom meeting.

Side Event

Two side events were convened on Wednesday. At breakfast, a meeting was convened by the United States entitled: 'Discussion of U.S Proposals for Post Review Conference Work' which introduced a Working Paper: 'Strengthening the Ability to take Action: An Essential Agenda for the Eighth Review Conference'. Presentations were given by Robert Wood and Christopher Park from the delegation. At lunchtime, a meeting was convened by the European Union, entitled: 'Launch of the New EU Council Decision in Support of the BWC'. Opening remarks were given by Peter Sørensen (EU) and Mary Soliman (UN Office for Disarmament Affairs [ODA]). Presentations were given by Jean Pascal Zanders (UN ODA), Beatriz Londoño Soto (Colombia), Deepak Dhital (Nepal) and Eloi Laourou (Benin). The event was chaired by Andras Kos (EU).

Reflections

A conscious effort is taken in writing these daily summaries to report objectively and not give opinion. However, 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 atmosphere over these two days was very much like the first week of a Review Conference. Proposals put forward were general and nobody wants to expend political capital criticising proposals by others at this early stage as it is not clear whether other issues might come up. The S&T discussion was productive, but there are many challenges in identifying a review process that meets the approval of all States Parties.

While delegations look at what form of work programme might result from the Eighth Review Conference, there is an unanswered question lurking in the background – What is the inter-sessional process for? In other words, how should the work programme lead to a more effective Convention? Not least, the programme should have flexibility to respond to real world practical events such as lessons from the Ebola outbreak or the development of the CRISPR gene editing tools that happened in the last five-year cycle.

On Tuesday, it was announced that roughly \$400k was yet to be received in agreed contributions to the BWC budget over a number of years, a magnitude that could have serious implications for future activities. A backlog of such a scale suggests some governments may not be taking their BWC obligations seriously.

This is the third and final report from the April meeting of the Preparatory Committee for 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) and are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org>> and <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>>.

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