

Tuesday 5th December 2017

## Return to Geneva: the opening of the 2017 Meeting of States Parties

The 2017 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) opened on Monday morning with Ambassador Amandeep Singh Gill of India in the Chair. As the Eighth Review Conference had concluded on 25 November 2016, this was the longest gap between formal BWC meetings since the Third Review Conference in 1991. The closest had been the 11 months between the suspension of the Fifth Review Conference on 7 December 2001 and its 11 November 2002 resumption.

There were a large number of delegates in the room. A clear indication of this was that the usual print run of these daily reports was exhausted.

The meeting was read out a message from UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu who noted that the 'security challenges posed by biological threats are becoming increasingly more complex'. She suggested that the BWC was 'no longer a strictly security focused instrument', that technical barriers to acquisition of biological weapons were being lowered and that 'implementation is not where it should be' for the BWC and related measures. It was therefore important for the MSP to 'make progress on reaching consensus for a substantive inter-sessional programme for the coming years'. She also urged States Parties to fulfil their financial obligations to the BWC.

A number of administrative and formal decisions, such as adoption of the agenda and programme of work, were taken and the Meeting was informed that Australia, Canada, Germany and India had offered sponsorship to assist 20 experts to attend the MSP to enhance participation by developing States Parties.

Following these formalities, Ambassador Gill offered some opening comments. He talked of the 'immense benefits' that arise from scientific and technological developments and noted that these developments also pose risks which must be assessed. There was a need for a 'wide ranging dialogue' as countries have 'divergent regulations and research governance'. He expressed concern at the current erosion of norms in other fields as 'chemical warfare agents have been used recently in conflict', noting that the BWC is 'not immune' to these developments as 'biological and chemical weapons related norms have normally been seen in conjunction'. He raised concerns about the possibility of acquisition and use of biological weapons by non-state actors, including terrorist groups, and noted that the BWC has a 'crucial role' in ensuring that such use never occurs.

At the end of the day's formal proceedings, the Chair circulated an 'aide memoire' (as document CRP.1) compiled from proposals submitted to the Eighth Review Conference in order to facilitate discussion in the coming days.

### **General debate / plenary statements**

The major part of the day's formal proceedings was taken up with plenary statements in what is known as the 'general debate'. Statements were given in the following order by: Venezuela (on behalf of the non-aligned), Philippines (on behalf of ASEAN), Germany, South Africa, Russia, Pakistan, Australia, China, Morocco, Italy, France, USA, Costa Rica,

Hungary, Indonesia, Switzerland, Thailand, Spain, Finland, Sweden, Cuba and Turkey. These continued after lunch by: Republic of Korea, Norway, Nepal, Japan, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Canada, Slovakia, Malaysia, Bulgaria, Panama, Philippines, Kazakhstan, Belgium, Serbia, Algeria, Netherlands, Brazil, India, Peru, Ukraine, Austria, Argentina, Latvia, Chile, Belarus, Sri Lanka, Cameroon, Paraguay, Ireland, Colombia and Poland. At the end of the day, there were still nine delegations on the list yet to speak, including Iran and Venezuela.

This is a significantly higher number of general debate statements than is usual for the opening day of an MSP – there were 2 group statements and 52 statements by individual States Parties – a sign of particular interest in this MSP. For comparison, there were 2 group statements and 38 statements by individual States Parties on the Monday of the 2015 MSP with the international organizations and the NGOs held over until the Tuesday. There were 2 group and 34 individual statements by States Parties on the Monday of the 2014 MSP which were then followed by the NGO statements. Six further plenary statements were made by individual States Parties on the Tuesday and these were followed by statements from international organizations. There was no MSP in 2016 as it was the year of the Review Conference. Part of the reason why a larger number of statements could be accommodated at this MSP was that many delegations gave abridged versions of their statements verbally, offering the full written versions for posting on the ISU website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>.

This appears to be the first group statement made by ASEAN within the BWC, although ASEAN activities have been reported in national statements at earlier meetings. The statement by Azerbaijan, its first since 2011, has some significance as that country is anticipated to succeed Venezuela as the convenor of the NAM in 2019. The statement by Paraguay is the first this author has records of in a BWC plenary session.

Many delegations welcomed the accession of Samoa which had brought the BWC membership to 179 States Parties. Samoa was represented in the meeting room by Hon. Lemi Taefu MP, Associate Minister for Natural Resources & Environment.

In comments on the outcome of the Eighth Review Conference, the most common description used was ‘disappointment’, with the next most common being ‘regret’. No statements were made on Monday in support of continuing an inter-sessional process without a substantive work element. The NAM statement referred to having an inter-sessional programme of work and reiterated desires for a system of verification through a legally binding instrument. [After formal proceedings had finished for the day, an ‘advance version’ of the NAM working paper on the inter-sessional programme was posted on the ISU website. This paper has a particular focus on inter-sessional work that might be carried out in relation to Article X.] Many delegations referred to a working paper (WP.10) by the three BWC depositary states (Russia, UK and USA) that contained possible elements for an inter-sessional work programme. Cuba spoke to its paper (WP.8) which described a different possible set of such elements.

As space is limited in this daily report, further discussion of the general debate will continue in forthcoming daily reports.

### **Side Events**

There were two lunchtime side events on Monday. One, convened by the International Genetically Engineered Machines competition (iGEM), was entitled ‘Safeguarding Advanced Biotechnologies in Practice: The iGEM Safety and Security Program’. The other, convened by Malaysia and the USA, was a briefing on a workshop held in Geneva the week before the MSP. After the close of formal proceedings, Russia convened a briefing on the international conference on biosecurity that it had held in Sochi in November.

*This is the second report from the BWC MSP, being held from 4 to 8 December 2017 in Geneva. These reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie of CBW Events on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). They are available via <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>> and <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>> [please note there have been technical difficulties updating the BWPP website]. An email subscription link is available on each page. The author can be contacted via <[richard@cbw-events.org.uk](mailto:richard@cbw-events.org.uk)>.*