

Wednesday 6th December 2017

The general debate concludes, the start of exchange of views

The 2017 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) continued for its second day on Tuesday with the ‘general debate’ with, in total, a record number of statements being made by delegations. These were followed by statements from international bodies and then NGOs. The meeting then moved into an exchange of views under agenda item 6.

Perhaps the most anticipated statement of the day was that of Iran, owing to the particular role that country’s delegation had played within the Eighth Review Conference. When statements are made there is usually general background noise from conversations in the room, but during the statement by Iran the room was noticeably quiet.

At the end of the day the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) informed the Meeting that, so far, a total of 22 working papers had been submitted.

General debate / plenary statements

The major part of the morning’s formal proceedings was taken up with general debate plenary statements. Statements were given in the following order by: Mexico, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Venezuela, Bhutan, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Sudan, Angola, Georgia, Myanmar, El Salvador, Swaziland, UK and Ghana. This brought the total of individual statements to 67 for the two days, with those from Bhutan, El Salvador and Swaziland being their first in a BWC plenary. The meeting then heard from international organizations in the following order: the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the European Union (EU), the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Science and Technology Centre (ISTC), the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Interpol and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). Where copies of statements are provided by those who delivered them, the ISU will place these on the BWC website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>.

The general debate was wide-ranging, but space limits what can be discussed here, hopefully there will be space in future daily reports to come back to this.

The statement by Iran gave clearer indications of the thinking by that country’s delegation. Ambassador Mohsen Naziri Asl suggested that the BWC as a ‘central instrument of disarmament and international security has been permanently weakening by unilateralism’, going on to say ‘Unilateralism doesn’t work and attempts to politically subordinate this international legally based treaty to mere national implementation, is not only unacceptable, but also impossible in today’s world. Consequently we will be seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law, and independent legal norms are becoming increasingly closer, to one state’s political and legal system’. The focus of the unilateralist comments is clearly the USA. On the specifics of the inter-sessional process, Iran stated: ‘Since 2003, the mandate and purpose of MSPs have been “to discuss, and promote common understanding and effective action” on specific topics. We

believe this mandate should continue to serve as the principal mandate of the next ISP and its related meetings. We are not convinced that going beyond that mandate as proposed by some delegations could strengthen the convention.’ The statement by the NAM on Monday referred to the inter-sessional mandate from the Seventh Review Conference in 2011 as being of use ‘to discuss, and promote common understanding and effective action ... on those issues identified for inclusion in the intersessional programme by this MSP’

NGO statements

The statements by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were preceded by a joint statement endorsed by a number of NGOs and individuals. This was followed by statements by: the InterAcademy Partnership, VERTIC, University of Bradford, International Federation of Biosafety Associations, Center for Biosafety Research and Strategy of Tianjin University, Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, Landau Network-Fondazione Volta, Research Group for Biological Arms Control at Hamburg University, University of Massachusetts Lowell, University of London, Pax Christi International and Women of Color Advancing Peace and Security. As with the general debate, where copies of NGO statements are provided by those who delivered them, the ISU will place these on the BWC website.

Exchange of views

The exchange of views was on ‘Issues of substance and process for the period before the next Review Conference, with a view to reaching consensus on an intersessional process’. The only delegation taking the floor that had not previously spoken in the MSP was Jordan.

Many interventions referred to the paper on possible elements by Russia, UK and USA – the three BWC depositary states – that appears as WP.10, the paper by Cuba on possible elements that appears as WP.8 and the NAM paper on possible inter-sessional work which has yet to be issued with a number. A number of delegations suggested WP.10 could be used as a template for discussion within the MSP; others suggested these three papers should be taken together. Iran suggested that WP.10 had no special status as the depositaries have no specific role dealing with substance of the Convention; the paper was therefore simply one produced by three States Parties.

The Chair of the MSP, Ambassador Amandeep Singh Gill of India, noted that interventions had a ‘constructive tone’ and that the exchange of views was being held in an ‘harmonious atmosphere’.

Side Events

There were two breakfast events on Tuesday: one on ‘Advances in Biological Sciences and Biocontainment’ was convened by the DBT-UNESCO Regional Centre for Biotechnology, India and the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security; and the other on ‘Science, Industry and the Chemical Weapons Convention: Scientific Review and Key Stakeholder Engagement’ was convened by the OPCW.

There were also two events at lunchtime: on ‘Biosecurity Education: Opportunities to learn from current progress and new initiatives’, convened by the UK and Ukraine; and a ‘Workshop on Smallpox Preparedness’, convened by Chimerix Inc.

Erratum – A misreading of my notes while preparing MSP report no 2 meant I didn’t spot that ASEAN had made a group statement in 2016, as reported in Review Conference report no 3, available from the links below. Apologies for any confusion.

This is the third 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>.