

Thursday 14th April 2011

The BWC Preparatory Committee: the opening day

The Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) for the Seventh Review Conference of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) was opened on Wednesday morning by Jarmo Sareva, Director of the Geneva Branch of the United Nations Office of Disarmament Affairs. The first formal decision of the meeting was the endorsement of Ambassador Paul van den IJssel (Netherlands) as President for the Review Conference and Chairman of the Preparatory Committee. On taking the Chair, Ambassador Van den IJssel suggested that the community of States Parties was ‘perhaps the best placed it has been for a decade or more to address the challenges facing the Convention’. He noted that the BWC had ‘noble and vital objectives’ and stressed that while the work of the Preparatory Committee was mostly procedural and ‘not glamorous or exciting’, it was necessary in order to give the Review Conference a solid start.

Cuba, as coordinator of the Non-Aligned group, announced that Ambassador Desra Percaya (Indonesia) would be that group’s nominee for Vice-Chairman of the PrepCom and Chair of the Committee of the Whole for the Review Conference. Romania, as coordinator of the Eastern European group, announced that Counsellor Judit Körömi (Hungary) would be that group’s nominee for Vice-Chairman of the PrepCom and Chair of the Drafting Committee for the Review Conference. These appointments were endorsed by the PrepCom. These three offices – President, Committee of the Whole Chair and Drafting Committee Chair – form the core of the ‘Bureau’ which handles administrative arrangements of the Review Conference. At the start of the Conference, the Bureau will be enlarged by the addition of a number of Vice-Presidents who will be appointed in such a way as to provide an appropriate geographical spread.

A number of what might be called ‘housekeeping’ decisions were taken, such as the formal adoption of the PrepCom agenda, that decisions should be taken by consensus, the use of all UN official languages, participation of signatory states, participation of Israel as an observer, participation of the European Union as an inter-governmental organization and the participation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Ambassador Van den IJssel noted that, as the PrepCom was procedural, there was no agenda item for general debate although there were two identified points at which statements could be made; the first was under agenda item 5 on the organization of the Review Conference, the second was under agenda item 9 on ‘other business’ once all the procedural arrangements had been concluded.

Within half an hour of the start of the meeting it moved into closed session as agenda item 5 was reached. Prepared statements, such as that by the European Union from behind the Hungarian seat, were thus given in private. In the 2006 PrepCom, when the meeting was closed for the same agenda item, the then Ambassador of Canada, Paul Meyer, wanted the prepared statement he was to read on behalf of Australia, Canada and New

Zealand to be heard by NGOs. NGOs were then let back in the room to hear that statement. In 2011 the situation was different and the meetings remained closed for the rest of the day.

The role of civil society within the BWC was the subject of debate following a suggestion by the Chairman of a paragraph for the PrepCom report which would not amend the draft rules of procedure but would recognize the practice of more openness that had evolved during the inter-sessional process – the last closed session of an annual meeting had been in 2008. Much of the debate focused on whether openness in the inter-sessional process, which was an engagement activity, could be compared with the Review Conference, which should be a deliberative process. India, for example, was a delegation that highlighted these differences. Iran expressed a desire for more clarity in this proposal and indicated that the arrangements for the Sixth Review Conference had been adequate. Algeria suggested that there should be informal consultations on the matter. Pakistan recognized the benefits of engagement with non-governmental representatives but felt that the Conference should be focused on the States Parties and so supported the Algerian suggestion. The United States, amongst others, spoke in favour of greater NGO access. [This intervention was significant as it was the USA which had pursued a firm line on closing many sessions of meetings to NGOs in the first inter-sessional process (2003-05).] At the close of the day's proceedings, consultations on this matter were on-going.

This situation highlighted difficulties of how understanding the processes within the room were much harder without any non-governmental presence there. For example, from outside of the room, some of the ambiguity could be interpreted as resulting from the Chairman's proposed text comparing 'committees' of the Review Conference with 'working sessions' of the annual meetings. There are three formal committees in a BWC Review Conference – the Committee of the Whole, the Drafting Committee and the Credentials Committee. It might therefore have been possible, if this interpretation had been correct, for a solution to be reached through an understanding that this new paragraph would not apply to the latter two of these committees. However, it seems that little, if any, discussion within the room was along these lines.

Other notable points of the day's proceedings included Iran suggesting that the subject of legally binding measures for strengthening the BWC, including through verification measures, should be put on the agenda of the Review Conference. Agreement was reached on the topics for background papers to be prepared by the ISU in time for the Review Conference. The list of topics will be reproduced in the final report of the PrepCom

Side Events

One lunchtime side event was held on Wednesday. This was convened by the University of Bradford Division of Peace Studies and the Inter-Academy Panel on the topic of 'Preparing for the Seventh Review Conference of the BWC'. Presentations were given by Malcolm Dando (Bradford) and Nicholas Sims (LSE) on recent papers in the Review Conference Papers series <<http://www.brad.ac.uk/acad/sbtwc/briefing/RCPapers.htm>>. Presentations on the theme of education of scientists were given by Simon Whitby (Bradford) on the University's Applied Dual-Use Biosecurity teaching and Anwar Nasim (Comstech) <<http://www.comstech.org>> on Biosafety Education in Pakistan.

A reception in the evening hosted by Ambassador Van den IJssel provided opportunities for informal interaction.

This is the second report from the Preparatory Committee for the Seventh BWC Review Conference which is being held from 13 to 15 April 2011 in Geneva. The Review Conference itself will be held during 5-22 December. The reports are designed to help people who are not in Geneva to follow the proceedings. Copies of these reports and those from the Sixth Review Conference in 2006 and subsequent annual meetings are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>>.

The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). For questions during the Preparatory Committee relating to these reports, please contact Richard Guthrie (+41 76 507 1026 or <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>).