

Tuesday 8th August 2023

The opening of the Second Session of the BWC Working Group

The Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) was opened on Monday morning in Salle XIX in the Palais des Nations. This was the first opportunity for substantive discussion of the first of the topics – international cooperation and assistance – allocated to it by the Ninth BWC Review Conference (2022). As the day progressed, much of the working time was taken up by procedural issues. [*Note:* Reporting of the substantive parts of some elements of activities on Monday will be held over to the later report in this series summarizing the overall discussions on this topic. These include a briefing from facilitators, the introduction of the ASEAN working paper (WP.1) and a statement by the EU.]

Opening the meeting, the Chair of the Working Group, Ambassador Flávio Damico (Brazil) noted this was a public meeting webcast to the world via UN Web TV <https://media.un.org/en/webtv>. He reminded delegates of the updated programme he had circulated on 21 July and noted that once states parties had completed their contributions, observers would be invited to make contributions and that this would include non-governmental representatives.

Documents and presentations (where those giving them want them posted) will be available via <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/67451> – the official webpage for the Second Session. Official BWC documents are also available via <https://documents.un.org>.

Message from the UN High Representative

The first formal presentation of the day was a video message from Izumi Nakamitsu, the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs. She highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic had shown the catastrophic global impact that infectious disease can have, arguing this demonstrated the importance of the BWC and the need for it to be ‘fully operationalized, properly institutionalized and fit for purpose’. She reminded delegates that the recent paper by the UN Secretary-General ‘New Agenda for Peace’ recommends enhanced efforts to identify and respond to emerging and evolving biological risks.

Technical presentation and panel

Michael Ryan from the Health Emergencies Programme at the World Health Organization (WHO) gave a technical presentation. He spoke of efforts by the member states of the WHO to negotiate a new international accord, commonly known as the ‘pandemic treaty’, to help countries work more effectively in the event of a new pandemic. He also spoke to the work on possible revisions to the International Health Regulations (which include suggested changes to provisions relating to detection, compliance and verification) and preparations for a high-level meeting in New York in September. He noted that the interface between the WHO and others in the response to a deliberate event is the area where there is ‘the least clarity’ as the WHO must have public health as its primary role while other agencies deal with any political and criminal aspects. While rapid response measures had received considerable resources, prevention and preparedness measures were much harder to gain sustainable funding, he argued.

This was followed by a panel made up of Martin Krause of the Department of Technical Cooperation at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Sylvie Briand of the Pandemic and Epidemic Diseases Department at the WHO. The IAEA presentation described its Technical Cooperation Programme, which is funded by the Technical Cooperation Fund (TCF). The TCF has a hybrid character as it is a voluntary fund but donations are provided in line with the assessed contributions to the Agency by member states. This was the focus of a number of questions to the panel. [Note: the TCF is outlined at <https://www.iaea.org/topics/temporary/funding-the-programme>.] Within the TCP, capacity building is conceptualized at three levels: human level (e.g., training of experts to enhance skills); institutional level (e.g., strengthening regulators and operators); and the systemic level (e.g., enhancing laws). The WHO presentation spoke of the UN Biosecurity Working Group that involves 30 UN entities, of which around 10 were added in 2022. While the COVID-19 pandemic had less medical impact than the flu pandemic 100 years earlier in terms of fatalities, but the impact was arguably greater as modern societies are more vulnerable to disruption, including through rumours and disinformation, despite modern tools to counter infectious disease. One theme of questions was how lessons might be learned from these institutions while the BWC remains without one. For example, the TCP has around 200 staff compared with the BWC ISU total staff of four.

Implementation Support Unit (ISU) briefing

ISU Chief Daniel Feakes briefed the Working Group on the activities of the ISU to support international cooperation and assistance. He noted five areas it is specifically mandated in this area: the Article X database; the sponsorship programme; receipt of national Article X reports; providing support for the comprehensive implementation and universalization of the BWC; and support for decisions and recommendations of the Review Conference. He also highlighted the Youth for Biosecurity Initiative, the tailored regional approach in Africa, and other capacity-building activities coordinated by the ISU, mostly funded through voluntary contributions.

Procedural issues

Before the video message from the High Representative was played a point of order was raised by Russia to express concerns about possible flexibility relating to non-governmental statements to the WG, suggesting that NGO statements at the Ninth Review Conference had been ‘politicized’. The Chair responded by saying he would not hesitate to intervene if any statement was out of order.

Before the technical presentation a point of order was raised by Russia to express concerns that the initial activities were focused on international bodies and that the BWC should focus on interactions between states parties. An exchange of views followed. Summing up, the Chair suggested the meeting should proceed as planned on the basis this would not set a precedent and that observers, whether inter-governmental or non-governmental, could make observations after states parties had made their views known. There was no objection to this suggestion.

In the afternoon, the Chair offered the floor to the EU, prompting a point of order by Russia to express concern that an observer was being given precedence over states parties. An exchange of views followed. As no solution was immediately apparent, the meeting was suspended for 15 minutes for consultations, resuming nearly two hours later. The Chair informed the Group that no solution had been found and, in order to return to substantive business, asked if any state party wished to make a statement. As no state party indicated it wished to do so, the Chair asked if there was any observer wishing to take the floor. The EU raised its nameplate and the Chair gave the EU the floor to read its statement just over two hours after it had initially been given the floor. After this, the meeting was adjourned as it was now close to the scheduled end of the day’s proceedings.

These reports have been produced for all BWC meetings with NGO registration since the Sixth Review Conference (2006). They are available from <https://www.bwpp.org/reports.html> and <https://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>. A subscription link is available on each page. Financial support for reporting from the WG Second Session has been gratefully received from Global Affairs Canada. The reports are written by Richard Guthrie, CBW Events, who is solely responsible for their contents <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.