

Monday 16th December 2024

Fifth Session closure - a rare speech and concerns for the future

Friday 13th, was always going to be an inauspicious date for the last day of a meeting. The Fifth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) held its last day on this date, opening with a peculiar atmosphere owing to the events of the night before (see the previous report in this series) which had brought the current efforts of the WG to an abrupt halt. The Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), spoke with some intensity to the plenary. This was, with some certainty, the most furious speech this particular commentator has seen in international diplomacy, with a clear expression of passion and frustration. Owing to this rare character, the speech is repeated in full below.

The Chair's speech (as delivered)

Dostoevsky once wrote 'when reason fails, the devil helps'. These words, though penned in another era, echo faintly in moments like this.

Yesterday evening an interpretation was voiced in sharp divergence with the assumptions that guided our collective work up to that point. It was not anticipated and it introduced an element of uncertainty into what had otherwise been a coherent path of collaboration.

This unexpected shift posed questions about the very foundations we have laid together at this Fifth Session of the Working Group. As you all know, the urgency with which this presidency has approached its mandate is rooted in a conviction that action on the mechanisms of International Cooperation and Assistance (ICA) and Science and Technology (S&T) cannot wait. The groundwork has been clear from the beginning and even before – a concerted effort to deliver recommendations that could support the adoption of these mechanisms by 2025. The aim has always been pragmatic, anchored in the belief that our Convention needs tools that are both effective and timely.

We have poured our time and energy into this effort. Precious resources have been spent to ensure these mechanisms could be operational by 2025. Yet now we are told to wait, to delay, to finish every item on the agenda before these mechanisms can breathe life. If we take this path, mechanisms will one day – at best – be born old.

This delay is not harmless. It comes at a cost, a huge cost. The biosecurity landscape is evolving rapidly. The BWC risks failing even further behind. A single lapse in vigilance could spark consequences that reverberate across continents and generations. Developing countries, in particular, will bear the brunt of this inertia. And I repeat, developing countries in particular will bear the brunt of this inertia. The link between disarmament and development is not theoretical.

Let us be honest. The broader disarmament community is struggling. Respect for the UN charter is wanting. Consensus outcomes elude us. And again I repeat, consensus outcomes elude us. The culture of multilateralism is fraying. Emerging threats are not being addressed with the seriousness they demand.

Have we learned nothing from COVID-19?

Without trust, there is no multilateralism. Without faith in each other's intentions, there is no progress. The events last night test this trust. They cast a shadow over the clarity and purpose we have worked so hard to cultivate.

Let's dispense with the illusion that success in disarmament can be measured in terms of tactical brinkmanship. The challenges we face demand genuine solutions, not fleeting triumphs over process. History will judge harshly those who left urgent needs unmet and critical opportunities wasted.

But shadows only exist where there is light. This community has shown, time and again, its capacity to rise above setbacks. We share a responsibility that transcends national lines and procedural debates. It is a responsibility to the future – to those who will leave with the decisions we make here today.

Trust, once tested, must be rebuilt with action. We owe it to ourselves and to each other to recommend this shared purpose.

Let us move forward with clarity of purpose and unshakable resolve. The stakes demand no less. The urgency of our times demands no less.

As the mandate of this presidency draws to a close later this month, the path forward will depend on the collective resolve and leadership of this community. The strength of this convention lies not in a single term or individual, but in the shared commitment of its membership.

Allow me to close with a personal reflection. I owe this community an apology. I thought the devil was confined to the details. But I now see that it found its way in this very room.

plenary discussions that followed

There were nearly 40 interventions in a short plenary with many statements of regret that unfulfilled progress had been made and that what had been achieved thus far should be the basis for future work. Frustration was expressed regarding the blocking position and why had it not been expressed earlier. The UK, speaking also for the USA, acknowledged as depositaries that a Special Conference would be convened if a majority of states parties so requested. France indicated it had prepared a declaration for states parties to sign up to call a Special Conference. Ambassador Bencini (Italy), who had been President of the Ninth BWC Review Conference (2022) which had agreed the text that was being contested, disagreed with the interpretation being placed upon it by Russia.

By tradition, when one state raises an objection during informal consultations it is not named in the plenary. Belgium asked for enlightenment for those ‘not privileged to partake in the informal consultations’ as to which state party had voiced its objection or to invite the state party to repeat its objection. This was the last intervention from the floor. After the meeting, Russia claimed to have raised its nameplate to indicate it wished to take the floor before the gavel had been brought down.

The Fifth Session was brought to an end by a simple announcement by the Chair that it was closed, after he had reached the end of his list of those asking to take the floor. There was no adoption of a procedural report.

Some possible consequences of the situation

The most pressing challenge is can the momentum that has been built up to this point be sustained? Apart from the three-day Meeting of States Parties (MSP) to be held this week (which is suffering its own challenges and will be reported on in the next report in this series), there is no official BWC meeting until the Sixth Session of the WG which is likely to be held in August. This would allow for much informal work between the Fifth and the Sixth Session. However, it needs a focal point in the role of the Chair. However, no potential office holder has volunteered their name to be put forward. Without a Chair it is inevitable that there will be some loss of focus. Moreover, without a Chair is it possible to have ‘Friends of the Chair’. Even if they were rebranded as ‘facilitators’, perhaps, the individuals may be willing to continue working but would they be able to convince their capitals that this is an acceptable use of their time?

There is a strong feeling that a Special Conference could still be convened but this raises immediate questions. If a Special Conference were to be convened, would it be able to reach a conclusion by consensus? The rules of procedure of BWC meetings allow for voting, but this would be an unprecedented step within the Convention. Most states parties are usually hesitant about voting as they would not want to be in a minority in a future situation. However, if other routes to progress are blocked what is the alternative? If the BWC cannot make progress, should action move to a different forum – but might that weaken the BWC even further? Would this make voting the lesser of two evils?

These reports have been produced by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) 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 webpage. The reports are written by Richard Guthrie, CBW Events, who is solely responsible for their contents <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.