

Thursday 14th August 2025

## Confidence-building and transparency at WG6: setting the scene

The plenary topic at the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) for Friday 15th and Monday 18th is scheduled to be ‘Measures on confidence-building and transparency’. This is topic (c) of those allocated to the WG.

The BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) produced a background information document on this topic during July. This have been posted, alongside other meeting documents and statements, to the official WG6 web page which can be found at <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/75240/>

### **Confidence-building and transparency issues in context**

Issues of confidence-building and transparency are connected with understandings about compliance and verification. The key difference is that the former are usually less formal arrangements and the latter are legally binding measures. While some analysts would consider these two distinctly separate activities, many others would consider them as being different points on a continuum. It is broadly agreed that the level of detail in BWC Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) and other transparency activities is not sufficient to consider them tools to be used to assess compliance of states parties with BWC obligations. However, the conceptual exercise to consider what it is that states parties should know about each other in order to raise confidence in compliance is a useful contribution to concepts of verification. Issues of compliance and verification are scheduled for discussion in the second week of WG6.

The BWC system of CBMs provides for annual returns to be provided by states parties on particular relevant activities and facilities. The Second BWC Review Conference (1986) agreed: ‘that the States Parties are to implement, on the basis of mutual co-operation, the following measures, in order to prevent or reduce the occurrence of ambiguities, doubts and suspicions, and in order to improve international co-operation in the field of peaceful bacteriological (biological) activities’. The CBM forms were last updated at the Seventh BWC Review Conference (2011). States parties can choose to make their CBM returns public and this can help make the process more transparent. Lack of clarity about what is achieved through the CBM system may be an inhibitory influence on the number of CBM returns.

The submission rate for CBM returns has been steadily increasing each year for the last decade or so. There had been a minor peak in 2016 – the year of the Eighth BWC Review Conference which focused attention on the subject. There was a small dip in 2017 but since then the submission rate has been rising. The three-figure milestone was passed in 2023 when 106 returns were submitted. There were 113 in 2024 and, at the time of writing, the ISU CBM website indicates there have been 101 returns so far in 2025 with the most recent received on 11 August from Nigeria. There is therefore potential for 2025 to be another record year. Nevertheless, there are now 189 states parties so there remains considerable room for numerical improvement.

Many proposals have been made over the years in an effort to improve the

CBM system in some way. In most cases terms such as to ‘strengthen’ or ‘enhance’ CBMs have been used but there have not been common perspectives on what this means in practical terms. For example, if CBMs are simplified in such a way that it takes less effort to fill them in – especially by reducing the level of detail in the information passed on – will the information be as valuable? On the other hand, if requirements for additional information were to be adopted, would this reduce the number of returns?

Progress has been made to ease the logistics for submitting returns through an electronic portal. There has been encouragement for a step-by-step approach for states parties that has been promoted by Japan that allows states parties initially to submit only the forms for which they have the available information and thus allowing more time for collation of data for other forms.

There have been a number of proposals made in recent years for voluntary transparency measures through which states can provide evidence that they are in compliance with their BWC obligations. There are long-standing divergences of views on these. Some states parties see these as distraction from developing formal verification measures while others see them as ways to test ideas that might help develop future multilateral compliance and verification thinking.

As in other areas of the BWC, this issue area does not operate in isolation. Preparation of CBM returns or participation in transparency activities can help governments with national implementation. Not only does the activity of collating the information provide a check that the government is aware of all of the relevant activities under its jurisdiction or control, it also promotes interaction between ministries, departments and agencies that have relevant responsibilities but do not routinely communicate with each other on BWC issues. It can also identify gaps where capacity-building activities might be useful under ICA efforts.

### **Discussions in the Working Group and the rolling text**

This topic was previously discussed in the Third (December 2023) and Fifth (December 2024) Sessions. WG3 working papers focused on CBMs include: WP.4 (Russia), WP.6 (UK), WP.7 (Uganda), WP.9 [plus Rev.1] (USA) and WP.16 (EU). Those from WG5 include: WP.8 (Russia) and WP.19 (EU). During both WG sessions there were additional papers on compliance and verification issues that touched upon confidence-building and transparency issues. There have been few specific CBM proposals. Russia has suggested amendments to the CBM forms, in particular on military biomedical activities conducted by states parties on the territory of other states and on animal vaccine production facilities.

As in other WG topics, there have been active Friends of the Chair. The Friends of the Chair for this topic, Laurent Masméjean (Switzerland) and Angel Horna (Peru) circulated a ‘food-for-thought paper’ to delegations in November 2024. This had been based on an early reflections paper which had been discussed online in June of that year and then further developed. The Friends of the Chair noted that proposals to enable greater participation in the CBM system fell in four sub-areas: providing enhanced guidance and tailored support; taking steps to facilitate the reporting process; easing the burden of submitting CBMs; and increasing incentives to participate in CBMs.

The rolling text circulated by the Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), shortly before WG6 draws on a number of the ideas contained in the papers from the Friends of the Chair. The relevant section of the rolling text is particularly focused on CBMs, presumably as this is more likely to generate consensus text. There is the suggestion of an ISU-led training programme on preparing CBM returns; support for the step-by-step approach; inclusion of CBM preparation in international cooperation and assistance (ICA) projects; improvement of the platform for electronic submission of CBMs; and launch of a review process to discuss possible CBM system changes.

*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](mailto:richard@cbw-events.org.uk)>.*