

Sunday 10th August 2025

The Sixth Session of the BWC Working Group: setting the scene

The Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) is scheduled to convene in Geneva from 11 to 22 August 2025. The WG was established by the Ninth BWC Review Conference (2022) with seven specific topics listed in paragraph 8 of part II of its final report. These are: (a) international cooperation and assistance (ICA) under Article X; (b) scientific and technological (S&T) developments relevant to the BWC; (c) confidence-building and transparency; (d) compliance and verification; (e) national implementation of the Convention; (f) assistance, response and preparedness under Article VII; and (g) organizational, institutional and financial arrangements. It was suggested that the S&T review and international cooperation and assistance (ICA) mechanisms should be dealt with as additional topics as the relevant paragraphs recording the decision of the Review Conference to work towards establishment of each of these mechanisms (paras. 18 and 19 respectively) included the wording: ‘In order for this mechanism to be established, the Working Group on the strengthening of the Convention will make appropriate recommendations.’

There have been a number of personnel changes as is usual in multi-year multilateral processes. The First WG Session appointed Ambassador Flávio Damico (Brazil) as Chair with Ambassador Camille Petit (France) and Irakli Jgenti (Georgia) as Vice-Chairs. When Ambassador Damico moved to another post in 2024, his compatriot, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer, took up the Chair. The tenure of this initial team was to the end of 2024. Agreement was reached that these people should remain in their posts for 2025. However, a routine rotation means that Ambassador Petit is moving to another posting. The WG is expected to appoint a new Vice-Chair as part of its opening formalities. Other rotations mean that there are some changes to the ‘Friends of the Chair’. These will be listed as each topic is reported.

This session is scheduled to deal with five topics – ICA (Mon 11/Tues 12), S&T developments (Weds 13/Thurs 14), confidence-building and transparency (Fri 15/Mon 18), compliance and verification (Tues 19/Weds 20), and national implementation (Thurs 21/Fri 22). Informal consultations will be convened during the session to discuss the two other paragraph 8 topics. There may also be informal consultations on the rolling text (see below)

Proceedings for public meetings will be video streamed via UN WebTV at <https://media.un.org/en/webtv/> and audio streamed via Listen Live at <https://listen-live.unog.ch/en/index.html> Official documents and other materials are being posted by the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) to the official web page of the Sixth Session which can be found at <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/75240/>

BWC membership

Since the group last met in December 2024 there have been two additions to the membership of the BWC. Comoros deposited its instrument of accession on 14 February with Kiribati depositing its instrument on 20 May, becoming the 188th and 189th BWC states parties, respectively. All Asia-Pacific countries are now parties to the Convention

with only eight states across the rest of the world that have neither ratified nor acceded (although some have signed). Universalization issues are not specifically discussed in the WG as they are within the remit of the annual BWC Meeting of States Parties (MSP) held at the end of each calendar year; however, the MSP in each of 2023 and 2024 has not been able to hold substantive discussions.

Rolling Text

There have been a number of activities since the Fifth Session in efforts to make progress towards consensus. These have included regional seminars, for example. The Chair has been active in engagement with delegations. On 28 July, the Chair wrote to states parties with a 'rolling text'. This was then reproduced a week later as [CRP.1](#) of the Sixth Session, entitled 'Draft specific and effective measures, including possible legally-binding measures, to strengthen and institutionalize the Biological Weapons Convention in all its aspects' and posted on the WG6 website. This had been preceded by an 'elements paper' in May, based on the work carried out in the first five sessions. Feedback from delegations on the elements paper informed the drafting of the rolling text. During a UNDIR webinar the week before WG6, Ambassador Meyer described the rolling text as a tool rather than an outcome in itself. He hoped it would focus discussion on practical questions and so lead to consensus text. He noted there was no language included on the two proposed mechanisms as he would discuss these in a parallel track.

Anniversaries and a possible Special Conference

The Ninth Review Conference was explicit in encouraging the Working Group to complete its work before the end of 2025, if possible – the year that marks the centenary of the 1925 Geneva Protocol and 50 years since the entry into force of the BWC. Many delegates had hoped that these two anniversaries would help focus discussion as this would be a fitting point in which to show significant progress in strengthening the Convention. A proposal during 2024 to hold a Special Conference in 2025 to adopt the two mechanisms had gained substantial momentum but was brought to a sudden halt near the end of WG5 by the expression by one delegation, Russia, of an interpretation of the WG mandate which was not shared by those that wanted to convene the Special Conference in these circumstances. Following past practice, it would not be possible to conclude an outcome at a Special Conference without agreement by consensus. A number of delegations submitted a working paper (WP.21) to the MSP providing their interpretation of the mandate entitled 'On a Special Conference and the ICA and S&T mechanisms'. This was sponsored by: Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Samoa, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Timor-Leste and USA. Some commentators have noted the fiftieth anniversary year for the BWC lasts until March 2026.

Publication schedule for these reports

For each topic under formal discussion, a 'setting the scene' report will be circulated beforehand, so that the one on international cooperation and assistance will be published on Monday and a discussion of the proceedings on the topic can be published on Wednesday. The gap on Tuesday allows for the publication of the setting the scene report on S&T developments. This pattern will be followed over the two weeks. This has been found to be more useful to many readers than a report on the proceedings each day.

Reports in this series from the first five Working Group Sessions (and earlier BWC meetings) are available from the links provided below.

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>.

Monday 11th August 2025

International cooperation and assistance at WG6: setting the scene

The topic scheduled for the first two days of the Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC), is ‘Measures on cooperation and assistance under Article X’. This is topic (a) of those allocated to the WG by the Ninth BWC Review Conference (2022). While the agenda item for this Session is the broader international cooperation and assistance (ICA) topic, it is likely that the possibilities for an ICA mechanism will be the focus of many discussions. Key to getting consensus at the Ninth Review Conference was agreement on enhancing the implementation of Article X through the establishment of some form of mechanism. To this end, paragraph 18 of the Final Document reads: ‘The Conference decides to develop with a view to establishing a mechanism open to all States Parties to facilitate and support the full implementation of international cooperation and assistance under Article X. In order for this mechanism to be established, the Working Group on the strengthening of the Convention will make appropriate recommendations.’

Article X issues in context

Article X embodies a key bargain within the BWC that the renunciation of biological weapons and the implementation of controls over hostile uses of the life sciences have to be balanced so not to hinder the use of the life sciences for peaceful purposes. In addition, Article X provides that states parties ‘undertake to facilitate, and have the right to participate in, the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information for the use of bacteriological (biological) agents and toxins for peaceful purposes’. The concept of ‘cooperation and assistance’ goes further than Article X itself, including aspects such as capacity building. The importance of ICA issues for many countries is reflected by the inclusion of these issues in some form in each of the BWC inter-sessional work programmes since the first was established at the resumed Fifth Review Conference in 2002.

Developments in the life sciences underpin many positive aspects of modern societies. New medical treatments have a substantial human impact and the use of biological technologies and techniques in manufacturing processes support a number of economically significant activities. In recent years, disease outbreaks such as SARS, Ebola Virus Disease and the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the vulnerability of modern societies to the impacts of infectious disease. It has been clearly demonstrated that no country is safe from a highly transmissible disease unless there are capabilities to deal with that disease across the globe. As biological weapons are essentially tools for the deliberate spread of disease, it follows that enhanced capacities to deal with naturally occurring diseases reduce the potential for harm from deliberate disease.

There are long-standing distinct divergences of perspectives between states parties on ICA issues. Many of these derive from security, economic and geographical considerations which influence how individual countries see the balance between the two sides of the bargain embodied in Article X. Where the divergence remains strongest is on the scope of Article X and on the question of how to improve implementation of it. Some delegations have expressed the view in past BWC meetings that Article X is incompatible

with the imposition of economic sanctions (often referred to as ‘unilateral coercive measures’) and that denials of export licences for materials and technologies for peaceful purposes are contrary to Article X. Other delegations have taken an opposite view and have highlighted the challenges of controlling materials and technologies that have peaceful uses as well as having potential to contribute to a biological weapons programme.

This tension is reflected in the WG mandate which notes that any measures it proposes ‘should be formulated and designed in a manner that their implementation supports international cooperation, scientific research and economic and technological development, avoiding any negative impacts.’

As with other BWC measures, Article X does not stand alone. As well as the interactions with security elements of the Convention, there are widely-acknowledged synergies with assistance, response and preparedness activities under Article VII.

An earlier initiative to enhance implementation of Article X was the creation of ‘a database system to facilitate requests for and offers of exchange of assistance and cooperation among States Parties’, often referred to as the ‘Article X database’, by the Seventh Review Conference (2011). A number of delegations have suggested that the database is underused. The Ninth Review Conference (2022) added an ISU staff post which includes some ICA activities.

Discussions in the Working Group

The ICA topic, or the ICA mechanism, has been discussed as an agenda item during the Second (August 2023), Fourth (August 2024) and Fifth (December 2024) WG Sessions. Relevant WG2 working papers include: WP.1 (ASEAN member states), WP.2 (UK), WP.3 [plus Rev.1] (USA and others), WP.5 (Japan), WP.6 (Canada and Philippines), WP.7 (Japan and others), WP.11 (Iran), WP.12 (Iran), WP.13 (Pakistan), WP.14 (China), WP.18 (Russia), WP.21 (Iran) and WP.22 (Georgia, Malawi, Norway and Philippines). The only relevant WG4 paper is: WP.7 (UK). Relevant WG5 papers include: WP.2 (Norway), WP.10 (Russia) and WP.14 (EU).

There have also been a number of informal consultations and an active effort by the Friends of the Chair (FoCs) for this topic – Christian Hope Reyes (Philippines) and Thomas Fetz/Trevor Smith (Canada). The FoCs circulated a non-paper just before the Fifth Session on a possible decision for an ICA mechanism. Much of what was within that was included in a proposal from the Chair for a draft decision by a Special Conference on the two mechanisms that was issued as [CRP.1](#) of WG5 on 8 December 2024. This proposal was brought to a halt on the penultimate evening of WG5 by one delegation; many other delegations have expressed support for continuation.

There is a clear desire to include ICA measures as part of the overall strengthening of the Convention. While the atmosphere towards an ICA mechanism is positive, some differences on possible details remain. Many of the divergences come down to perspectives on what success for the mechanism would mean. For example, from potential donor countries there is a desire to see effective use of funds on practical projects. From potential recipient countries there is a desire to make funding of capacity building projects easier. While these might not seem to be contradictory, one practice from other development areas is the use of a ‘cost-share contribution’ from the recipient states parties to promote sustainability and ownership of projects. This has raised concerns that some potential recipients might find this challenging. One of the yardsticks for success or failure of any potential ICA mechanism the current author has in mind is whether it attracts additional funding from donor countries.

The Rolling Text circulated by the Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), includes some suggested ICA measures including the establishment of an ‘International Biosecurity Education Network’ [this is distinct from an existing NGO activity with a very similar name], a ‘Laboratory Network’ to facilitate partnerships and training, and a ‘capacity-building fellowship programme’.

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>.

Tuesday 12th August 2025

Opening of WG6 and setting the scene for discussion of S&T developments

The Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) was opened on Monday morning with Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil) in the Chair. The plenary was to be held in Room XIX but had been moved to Room XX owing to the need for additional facilities for negotiations on the plastics treaty.

Participants were welcomed by a short video message from Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand and former head of the UN Development Programme. She is currently a member of The Elders and an author of that group's recent policy paper on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response. She called for applying insights from the COVID-19 experience and the 'fragmented approach to biosafety, biosecurity and pandemic risk' to the task of supporting a 'stronger, better-resourced' BWC which she noted lacked 'an independent verification mechanism, sustainable funding and dedicated technical capacity'. Calling for governments to 'move beyond rhetorical support', she concluded: 'Future generations will not judge us on the threats we faced. They will judge us on how we responded to them.'

As discussions on international cooperation and assistance (ICA) issues which started on Monday will continue into Tuesday, these will be reported on Wednesday.

Setting the scene for discussions on S&T developments

The topic scheduled for Wednesday and Thursday of the first week of WG6 is 'Measures on scientific and technological developments relevant to the Convention'. This is topic (b) of those allocated by the Ninth BWC Review Conference (2022). The Conference considered proposals for review of scientific and technological (S&T) developments in some detail, while facing considerable political challenges. In the final week, as successive iterations of the proposed text on S&T review were being produced in attempts to achieve consensus, more and more details were being removed. The Final Document was therefore sparse on this issue area and paragraph 19 reads: 'The Conference decides to develop with a view to establishing a mechanism to review and assess scientific and technological developments relevant to the Convention and to provide States Parties with relevant advice. In order for this mechanism to be established, the Working Group on the strengthening of the Convention will make appropriate recommendations.'

The life sciences have been undergoing rapid developments over recent decades at a pace that has accelerated in recent years. As new discoveries are made, the context the BWC has to operate within changes constantly. Without an understanding of the S&T context, it is impossible to maintain controls over the use of disease as a weapon at either the national or international level. Some of these challenges are amplified as the uses of biological technologies and techniques spread far more widely. There are many of these that may be used and so it is often inadvertently misleading these days to think of a 'biotechnology industry' rather than a range of industries that use biological methods. This adoption of biological techniques has led to more widespread availability and knowledge of materials and processes that may have potential for both peaceful and hostile purposes. Real-world experience has shown that S&T developments proceed at a

faster rate than the developments in policy structures intended to monitor them and, if new risks or benefits are identified, to manage them.

BWC Article XII, which deals with the role of Review Conferences, mandates ‘Such review shall take into account any new scientific and technological developments relevant to the Convention.’ There has been a recognition amongst a large number of states parties that the five-yearly process of briefly reviewing S&T developments during Review Conferences has not been enough – that S&T developments have been moving faster than the policy responses to them. A key challenge is that identifying relevant S&T developments is not enough on its own – once developments are identified, what are their implications? This need to identify implications can perhaps best be illustrated by the contemporary discussions about artificial intelligence. It is clear this particular field has been the subject of significant advances in recent years and while some implications are readily apparent, it is clear that there are likely to be more that will emerge. The same is true for many developments that are specifically in the life sciences. One example, much cited, is the CRISPR/Cas9 gene tool (often simply referred to as CRISPR) that allows for exact and accurate editing of genetic sequences. What are the implications for regulation to prevent its hostile use? Even in the relatively short time that this technique has been in more than simply experimental use, perceptions of these have changed.

Discussions in the WG

The S&T topic, or the associated proposed mechanism, were discussed during the Second (August 2023), Fourth (August 2024) and Fifth (December 2024) WG Sessions. Many relevant working papers were submitted to WG2 with the three referred to most often in plenary being WP.4 (US), WP.8 (UK) and WP.12 (Iran); and of those focused on a possible mechanism, the three referred to most often in plenary were WP.9 (UK), WP.16 (Russia) and WP.19 (Iran). One relevant paper was submitted to WG4: WP.6 (UK); as was the case in WG5: WP.17 (EU).

While most aspects of strengthening the BWC have synergies with other areas, the better understanding of S&T developments impacts across a broad swath of BWC activities which have been highlighted, including: verification, international cooperation and assistance, preparedness and response, and national implementation.

When BWC states parties first looked in detail at how the review of S&T developments could be enhanced, most contributions to discussions looked at one or other of two models – a panel, committee or board selected by some criteria to have a limited membership or a structure open to experts from all states parties willing to participate. Each of these approaches has advantages and disadvantages. More recently, many proposals have taken a hybrid approach that includes an open arrangement with some activities delegated to smaller panels. In recent discussions, most delegates that expressed a preference were happy with a hybrid model as from most perspectives it contains the elements they want even if it includes elements they were not so keen on having included. The number of explicit preferences indicated for either a limited-membership committee/board or of a body open to all states parties have significantly reduced over time. Underpinning most comments on reviews was a sentiment that any S&T process should be led by science and not by politics.

There have also been a number of informal consultations and an active effort by the Friends of the Chair (FoCs) for this topic – Grisselle Rodríguez (Panama), Peter Babigumira Ahabwe (Uganda) and Kiseok Michael Kang (Republic of Korea). There were various iterations of FoC papers on this topic, much of which was reflected in the December 2024 proposal from the Chair for a draft decision by a Special Conference on the two mechanisms and the Chair’s rolling text circulated shortly before this session.

The S&T section of the rolling text, which doesn’t include any detail relating to a possible S&T mechanism, is focused on activities for governance of research such as codes of conduct, guidelines and regulations as well as for foresight techniques.

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>.

Wednesday 13th August 2025

International cooperation and assistance: discussions at WG6

The Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) discussed the topic of 'Measures on cooperation and assistance under Article X' on Monday and Tuesday. Part of Monday morning was taken up with relatively brief opening formalities and the Helen Clark video. Part of Tuesday afternoon was taken up with an exchange of views in an informal setting on Article VII issues convened by the Friends of the Chair on that topic – Sofie Kallehauge (Denmark) and Angel Dalmazzo (Argentina).

The Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), has opened plenary meetings promptly which some delegates are not used to. He also stressed he wanted to maximize working time and so wanted to keep interactions in the room focused on the BWC and not let external geopolitics take time from the discussions.

Many interventions during these two days welcomed the two new states parties, Comoros and Kiribati, and both attended the WG. Some states parties participated in the WG for the first time, such as Bhutan and Gambia.

There were two ICA-focused working papers made available during the two days. One was from Russia (WP.1) on operational principles for the ICA mechanism. The other was from Australia (WP.4) on its Article X activities in the Indo-Pacific.

There were three group statements made in plenary: by South Africa on behalf of the African Group, by Cabo Verde on behalf of the Portuguese-speaking states and by Uganda on behalf of the non-aligned. There were numerous states parties making interventions and listing them would take up too much space.

Discussions on ICA and the rolling text

There was a solid set of agreed elements around the need for improved ICA activities. However, as in earlier discussions, there was a variety of positions taken on how to turn aspiration into reality. Old divergences on sanctions and export controls were raised without really moving the debate forward. The main items in the rolling text such as an 'International Biosecurity Education Network', a 'Laboratory Network' and a 'capacity-building fellowship programme' received positive comments. Some saw these as new suggestions while others saw them as logical extensions of things already being done. Concerns were raised about duplication with activities under other international regimes that had some similarities, such as other laboratory networks. Some felt the rolling text contained superfluous detail while others felt they needed more details on what was being proposed. As the rolling text is to focus discussion on what the WG might recommend to the Tenth Review Conference (2027), or a Special Conference, the suggestion was made to reformulate it as if it were a draft decision of either Conference.

Some cost estimates for possible activities were provided by the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU). These have been posted, alongside other meeting documents, to the official WG6 web page at <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/75240/>

Discussions on the proposed mechanism

The desire for an effective mechanism was expressed by numerous delegations. However, it was apparent from the views expressed that there was no clear shared perception of what

would constitute effectiveness. There was significant consensus on many elements of the proposal by the Chair from December 2024, but also some areas to be resolved which the Chair specifically asked delegates to consider.

Structure – there was common ground that there should be a ‘Steering Group’ comprised of up to 20 states to manage the implementation of the mechanism but there remained a question over how these should be selected. Could BWC observers such as the EU be part of it? There was consensus that there should be an ‘Advisory Group’ composed of all states parties, but as a distinct activity or more practical to make it an agenda item of the annual Meeting of States Parties (MSP)? There were arguments both ways with no clear conclusion. One issue was whether the Advisory Group could question what the Steering Group had proposed as its package of annual activities. Some interventions expressed a desire for this, arguing that all states parties should have an input into the decisions within the ICA mechanism. Others suggested that to have the larger group revisiting in detail the work of the smaller group would duplicate effort and possibly lead to a lack of consensus if there were disagreements in the larger group. This implied the larger group could take decisions. Over the years, the question of whether MSPs could take decisions has been controversial – there are some who insist that a Review Conference is the only BWC body that can take decisions; others suggest that a Review Conference can delegate any of its powers to another meeting. There seemed to be common ground that the Advisory Group could not be given greater powers than an MSP. A rhetorical question was posed – since the states parties attending an MSP are the same as go to a Review Conference, and are often sitting in the same room for each gathering, how is it we can trust them to have the wisdom to be correct only once in every five years?

ICA Trust Fund – should the source of funds be wholly voluntary, wholly from assessed contributions, or some form of hybrid arrangement? Arguments in favour of voluntary funding included that it allowed for flexibility and that there had been successful examples of fundraising this way. The arguments against included that it reduced predictability of funding as available funds may vary between years. This discussion also revealed a sometimes rather subtle distinction between those who perceived voluntary contributions to such a fund as donations and those who saw them as an investment in greater security for all against biological threats. Arguments expressed in favour of assessed contributions included that all states parties would have ‘ownership’ of the mechanism and those against included that this would mean developing countries were paying towards their own assistance. There was some discussion on whether projects under the mechanism should be voluntary funded while assessed contributions covered the administrative costs. It was highlighted that the Trust Fund for the Arms Trade Treaty is administered using voluntary funds. Pakistan revisited a proposal it had made in WP.13 of WG2 which featured ‘voluntary but assessed contributions’ to ensure predictability which garnered some supportive responses but also concerns that targets for funding generated this way might become limits instead.

Cost share contribution – this remained perhaps the area of strongest divergence. Many interventions suggested that even a small contribution by the recipient state would be seen as a barrier to participation; others repeated the ownership and sustainability arguments that have been made previously in favour of such a contribution.

Should being in financial arrears preclude access to the ICA mechanism? – this also remained inconclusive, although positions in favour of this were much less strongly held than for the cost share contribution. Those opposed saw this as another potential barrier to participation.

Editorial Note: in times past there would often be a disconnect in BWC meeting rooms between diplomats and scientists – each were trying to get to grips with the perspectives of the other and it took some time to find some common working practices. In an echo of this, there now seems to be a similar disconnect between diplomats and project implementers. Working through this may be key to success in the ICA area.

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>.

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>.

Friday 15th August 2025

Scientific and technological (S&T) developments: discussions at WG6

The topic discussed on Wednesday and Thursday was ‘Measures on scientific and technological developments relevant to the Convention’. On Wednesday morning some additional statements were made on international cooperation and assistance (ICA) issues. By Thursday lunchtime, no further delegations wanted to take the floor for S&T discussions, the Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), therefore moved to the next item on the agenda ‘Measures on confidence-building and transparency’ that had been scheduled to start on Friday. Those discussions will be covered in a later report. Part of Thursday afternoon was also taken up with a further exchange of views in an informal setting on Article VII issues convened by the Friends of the Chair on that topic. The number of delegates in the plenary dropped during Thursday as many were called to assist their colleagues in the plastics treaty negotiations.

There was one working paper on S&T issues which was from Russia (WP.2) on fundamental principles of the proposed S&T mechanism.

Group statements were delivered by South Africa for the African Group and by China for Brazil, China and Pakistan. The Uganda statement delivered on behalf of the non-aligned on Tuesday included a section on S&T issues.

Discussions on S&T and the rolling text

Most interventions were in support, at least in principle, of the suggestions in the rolling text. Many positions reflected delegations’ overall positions on the BWC – i.e., those focused on security aspects of the BWC emphasised the inputs into understanding new threats and challenges from S&T review processes; while those focused on development issues highlighted ICA benefits. Significantly, neither side of this divergence was critical of the other perspective which generated an atmosphere of broad acceptance of other positions. As with any discussion about textual outputs, there were many interventions on potential clarifications or streamlining of language. None of these were discussed in any way that might indicate whether there was clear support for them around the room.

A number of statements highlighted the lack of effective S&T review in existing arrangements and the need for greater vigilance in this area. Not only should this vigilance need to be more detailed than before, but it should be constant and ongoing. There were explicit acknowledgements that promoting responsible innovation would underpin the right to peaceful uses under Article X. Such promotion would also have to be relevant to the diverse contexts around the globe in which research is carried out and thus arrangements would have to be inclusive.

As with any suggestion of doing something new, there were concerns raised about possible duplication. A number of references to sources of expertise or standards on biosafety and biosecurity were made with the encouragement that they should not be overlooked or forgotten by any BWC processes. Examples cited included World Health Organization (WHO) guidance on the responsible use of the life sciences and standards set by ISO, the International Organization for Standards.

Some paragraphs within the rolling text made specific references to particular technologies. There was caution expressed about being too specific as the text being

discussed was intended to be part of a Review Conference or Special Conference decision and S&T would move on and new areas of concern would emerge. The phrase used by some delegates was that the text should be ‘technology-agnostic’ in order to stand the test of time. [Note: many analysts have attributed the comprehensive coverage of the BWC itself across the life sciences for five decades to the fact it does not include in its definitions any particular technologies to be controlled. It is thus regarded as being as ‘future-proof’ as it could be.]

Some cost estimates for potential S&T activities were presented by the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU). These are to be posted, alongside other meeting documents, to the official WG6 web page at <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/75240/>

The proposed S&T review mechanism

There was a sense of frustration in many interventions that it was taking so long to adopt an S&T mechanism as well as the ICA mechanism. Phrases were used such as ‘it is time to move beyond aspirations’. While it is clear that there are some remaining issues to clarify there was a sense by many that the mechanisms should be adopted as soon as possible. [Note: while the proposed ICA and S&T mechanisms are distinct activities, political linkages have developed over the years, such that neither is likely to be adopted without the other and so progress on each of them relies on progress on the other. This has led to some mirroring of arrangements within each of the mechanisms.] There were fewer specific questions from the WG Chair, than there had been for the ICA mechanism.

Structure – as with the ICA mechanism, there is a wider group comprising all states parties which in the S&T proposal is known as the Review Group; and there is a smaller group called the Reporting Committee. The question of how the membership of the Reporting Committee should be selected remains outstanding. It was noted that the parallels with the ICA mechanism are less useful as the membership of the Committee should be based on individual independent expertise whereas the ICA Steering Group would be comprised of representatives from governments. In trying to find a precedent for a procedure for selection of the smaller group for each of the mechanisms, the Chair noted that each BWC Review Conference appoints a General Committee (sometimes referred to as the Bureau) that is about the same size as the smaller bodies in the two mechanisms. There was some discussion of the logic of this process which did not reach any firm conclusions. To ensure geographical balance, the role of regional groups is important. The BWC has only three regional groups with fairly long formal names but which can be summarised as the Western Group, the Eastern Group and the Non-Aligned Group. These are rooted in the Cold War-era origins of the BWC. Russia has declared itself to be a ‘Group of One’, a move not without its own controversies. Many interventions made reference to the limitations this group system would have for selection of membership of the Reporting Committee. The most common suggestion for use in this case was the UN system of five regional groups.

Outputs – both the smaller and larger bodies will need to produce some form of reporting. The BWC has historically operated on the basis of consensus. However, the term consensus can be very different in an academic setting from a diplomatic one. In academic terms, a consensus can simply mean a broad agreement whereas in diplomacy it means a position that no one is actively disagreeing with. As the WG Chair has noted more than once, a diplomatic consensus is not one that everyone is happy about, but one that everyone can live with. There is still ambiguity about how outputs from an S&T mechanism would interact with national policy and assessment processes.

Scope – some questions were raised on the scope of the mechanism. Should it include compliance and verification issues, for example; especially if there is an open-ended working group on that topic established at the same time? Would each bring different perspectives into discussion or would this be a duplication of effort?

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>.