

Thursday 17th December 2015

Third day: science & technology and national implementation

Wednesday, the third day of the 2015 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC), was devoted to the two remaining standing agenda items. The morning session covered 'Review of developments in the field of science and technology related to the Convention', chaired by MSP Vice-chair Ambassador Henk Cor van der Kwast (Netherlands). The afternoon session dealt with 'Strengthening national implementation' with MSP Chair Ambassador Mazlan Muhammad (Malaysia) presiding. There were many cross-cutting issues raised as much of the subject matter for any single session overlaps with others. For example, France outlined its new national advisory board on biosecurity that had been established earlier this year as a science and technology (S&T) item yet it could have been equally raised as a national implementation item. Equally, many of the issues relating to benefits from advances in the life sciences could have been raised under Article X. Numerous statements were introductions or references to Working Papers (either already published or forthcoming).

There were also informal consultations [essentially, meetings behind closed doors] on the timing and costing of the Eighth Review Conference just before the lunch break and on the Chair's non-paper on elements that might be included in the Report of the MSP after the close of formal proceedings that lasted about three and a half hours.

Science & technology developments

Statements were given by Iran (for the non-aligned), China, Canada, Australia, Switzerland, UK, Netherlands, Russia, Cuba, India, France, USA, Japan and Finland. Three presentations of a more technical nature were then given by Switzerland, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and Georgia (for Georgia and Germany).

Widespread acknowledgement that S&T developments have to be taken into account in the operation of the BWC did not prompt consensus on how this might be done. Switzerland highlighted its Working Paper on an S&T review process. A number of delegations indicated this was an important issue for the Review Conference to consider.

Delegations suggested a particular difficulty with research oversight was early identification of risks within projects. The Netherlands spoke of its experience and lessons learned from the H5N1 influenza gain of function research. Delegations suggested controls should be proportional to assessed risks, but the task to assess the balance of benefits to risks for any particular research in any particular context is a difficult one.

Russia suggested arrangements to persuade any individual journal not to publish a particular article were limited as researchers could publish in another journal. The USA responded suggesting this was a problem the world over.

Codes of conduct were highlighted. The OPCW noted it had carried out a survey of codes relating the chemical sciences which is available on its website and this had contributed to the development of the recent Hague Ethical Guidelines. China spoke to its paper on potential to create a template for such codes.

National implementation

Statements were given by: Iran (for the non-aligned), Colombia, Russia, Thailand, Burkina Faso, Uganda, Antigua and Barbuda (the first time it has addressed a BWC meeting), Spain, Germany, Austria, China, Canada, Australia, Netherlands, Cuba, USA, France, Ghana, UK, Republic of Korea, Argentina, India, Algeria, Myanmar, Switzerland, Romania, Japan, Iraq, Kenya and Georgia.

Many governments referred to progress being made in implementation activities. For example, Colombia described its preparations to establish a national authority; Antigua and Barbuda noted its committee to oversee its efforts to implement measures to make it fully in compliance with its resolution 1540 obligations that would include controls on biological materials; and Canada described its new Human Pathogens and Toxins Regulations which entered into force this month. Cuba noted it was examining ways to include animal and human pathogens [disease causing organisms] within a single regime.

Review activities following on from the original peer review proposal by France were outlined. The Benelux countries peer review exercise was outlined. Germany announced a review project that would include a site visit. The USA announced that, together with Canada, Chile and Ghana, it would be holding 'implementation review' activities. The non-aligned restated their view that voluntary arrangements such as these should not distract from the need for a legally binding verification instrument. The USA noted Luxembourg and Mexico had made their latest Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) returns public for the first time.

Russia suggested insufficient action was taken with regard to the US transfers of laboratory samples containing inadequately inactivated germs that had been raised during the Meeting of Experts. The USA stated it was prepared to respond to concerns.

Review Conference arrangements

The depositary proposal for 2 separate weeks of Preparatory Committee and 3 weeks of Review Conference might be described in short as '1+1+3'. The additional costs of this over the recent practice of 3 days of PrepCom before a 3 week Conference has raised concerns. Some delegations initially hesitant about any change have indicated that they could agree to a week-long PrepCom, thus adding two working days to the programme – in short: '1+3'. The proponents for greater preparatory time suggest there would be benefits in having separate PrepCom meetings to allow for more detailed consideration and reflection on issues raised. From this perspective, if only 4 weeks were available, it might be better to have 2 separate weeks of PrepCom meetings and a 2-week Conference, '1+1+2'. Two weeks is not unprecedented – the Fourth Review Conference was this length (25 November-6 December 1996). Corridor discussions suggest that delegates are not close to a decision on this and all options bring with them particular costs and benefits. This may not be a stand-alone decision as there is potential for it to be tied into the diplomatic bargaining that will come with the negotiating of the MSP Report.

Side events

There were four side events on Wednesday. Two were convened at breakfast: one by Switzerland on 'Strengthening the UNSGM: an update'; the other by the Emerging Leaders in Biosecurity Initiative on 'Assessing the Biothreat, Proceeding Safely'. Two were held at lunchtime: one convened by the Royal Society and the International Academy Panel on 'Trends in science and technology that impact the BWC'; the other by UNICRI and the Philippines on 'Putting Biosafety and Biosecurity under the Microscope: Elements for an International Approach to Reinforce Capabilities and Address Future Risks'.

This is the fourth report from the BWC Meeting of States Parties, being held from 14 to 18 December 2015 in Geneva. These reports have been produced for all official BWC meetings since the Sixth Review Conference in 2006 by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) and are available via the BWPP website at <<http://www.bwpp.org>> and via <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>>.

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