

Wednesday 4th December 2019

The opening of the 2019 BWC Meeting of States Parties

The Meeting of States Parties (MSP) to the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) opened on Tuesday morning with Ambassador Yann Hwang (France) in the Chair.

The atmosphere in the building was not quite as usual. The annual UN bazaar (a charity fundraising event) was being held, with many stalls just outside of the meeting room. The escalators were not working, because of the UN's financial issues, with signs saying: 'Due to a severe liquidity problem on regular budget operations, escalators are out of use'. As had been indicated beforehand, the hours of building support services were reduced. This meant the meetings started and ended on time, which is not a common phenomenon in multilateral settings.

Opening of the MSP

The Chair, in his opening remarks, noted that in the modern world, no state claims biological weapons have any legitimate use. He noted that new scientific and technological developments were a source of hope but were also fraught with risk and that there was therefore a crucial need to find a way of transmitting useful proposals from the Meetings of Experts (MXs) to the Ninth Review Conference, scheduled for 2021.

The meeting heard a message from Izumi Nakamitsu, the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs which was communicated by Anja Kaspersen, Director of the Geneva Branch of the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs. The High Representative highlighted three 'core elements: preparedness, safeguarding and review capacities'. On preparedness, she noted that biological threats, whether natural or deliberate, 'cannot be dealt with by nation states acting alone' and it is worrisome 'that we are nowhere near having a global response mechanism in place' for future pandemics. Safeguarding the benefits of advances in the life sciences requires, amongst other things, strong public health services and overcoming the challenge of lowered barriers to access to materials that might be misused, she noted. On review capacity she welcomed the proposals made by several BWC states parties to establish a mechanism to comprehensively review relevant developments in science and technology relevant to the Convention and noted that the UN system already oversees several scientific review mechanisms across various domains, offering to 'facilitate insights and inputs from other relevant fora'.

General debate

The general debate provides an opportunity for delegations to make opening statements on any aspect of the Convention and its operations. Group statements were delivered by: Azerbaijan (on behalf of the NAM), Philippines (on behalf of ASEAN) and Iraq (on behalf of the Arab Group). National statements were given by: United States of America, Germany, Brazil, China, Canada, Belarus, India, Pakistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Japan, Russia, Spain, Thailand, Colombia, Jordan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Australia, Norway, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Sweden, Switzerland, Netherlands,

Philippines, South Africa, Peru, Ecuador, Republic of Korea, Ireland, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Romania, Nepal, Ukraine, UAE, Italy, Malaysia, Venezuela, Iran, Turkey, Lebanon, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nigeria, Poland, Libya, Chile, Panama, Mexico, Bulgaria, Iraq, UK, Cuba and Austria. There were also right of reply statements from Russia and Ukraine. During the afternoon, Vice-Chair Ambassador Adrian Vierita (Romania) took the reins for a period. The general debate will continue into Wednesday. The topics of the Meetings of Experts will be covered in detail in coming days in the MSP proceedings. Therefore, the focus here will be on themes that fall outside of those topics.

Universality – universal membership for the BWC has been a long-stated goal and there were many statements welcoming Tanzania as a new member and many calls for those outside the Convention to join it. India noted that the sponsorship programme for delegates contributed to universalization. The Chair had noted that delegates from 18 countries had been sponsored to travel to the MSP with funding from Canada and the EU.

Workshops and similar events – often cited as key to progress in universality and in implementation of a variety of aspects of the BWC, there were a number of workshops, seminars and other events referred to in statements. Examples mentioned included a series of workshops being organized through the ASEAN Regional Forum with assistance from Japan in which there have been two held so far in Thailand and Malaysia with a further one scheduled for the Philippines. Colombia mentioned a workshop in association with the Organization of American States that with support from the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) as well as other international bodies. European Union regional seminars, such as one held in Wellington, New Zealand were also mentioned.

Finances – Numerous delegations highlighted the financial situation of the BWC, with many stating that the only long-term solution was for assessed contributions to be paid in full and on time. China stated it had paid 2020 its dues already. The USA noted the need for states parties to clear arrears. On the Working Capital Fund, India announced a contribution of US\$10,000. The UK stated that the Fund should not be used to mask or excuse systematic non-payment of assessed contributions.

Preparations for the Ninth Review Conference – key decisions on the duration of the Conference and its associated preparatory meetings will need to be taken at the MSP this year so budgets can be set and plans made for accommodation while refurbishment of the Palais des Nations means there will be reduced space for conferences during construction work. Many delegations called for Preparatory Committee meetings that could discuss substantive items, as had been the case in 2016 for the Eighth Review Conference. Some noted that if there were substantive PrepCom meetings of the same duration as 2016 they would be content that the Review Conference be two weeks rather than the three that has been the usual duration. Russia, expressing regret for a lack of substantive outcome to the Eighth Review Conference, noted a need for preparations now.

Gender issues – there were many more references to this than in previous years, with numerous references to gender balances on delegations and to issues of gender impacts in relation to policies to respond to disease outbreaks. There were a number of references to recent work by UNIDIR in this area.

Side events

Usually in these reports it is useful to list side events taking place as an indication of the topics gaining most attention. However, the number of side events at BWC meetings keeps growing and is becoming too long to note them individually. However, they are listed on the BWC website with links to relevant publications where applicable. For example, on Monday there had been an all-day event and on Tuesday there were two breakfast events and two held at lunchtime.

This is the second report from the Meeting of States Parties for the BWC which is being held from 2 to 6 December 2019 in Geneva. These reports have been produced for all BWC meetings since the Sixth Review Conference in 2006 by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). They are posted to <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>> and <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>>. An email subscription link is available on each page.

The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie, CBW Events, who can be contacted via <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.