

Monday 12th December 2011

One Week Completed: a positive atmosphere, but a long road still ahead

The Seventh Review Conference of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) completed its first week of activities on Friday.

The proceedings started with two statements from international organizations that were technically a continuation of the general debate. The statements were made by Interpol and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI).

Article-by-article review / Committee of the Whole

The article-by-article review continued in the Committee of the Whole with Articles VII to X discussed on Friday. As before, the aim was to do a first run through each Article.

Article VII deals with the provision of ‘assistance’ by States Parties if a State Party is ‘exposed to danger’ because of a breach of the Convention. It was noted that neither ‘assistance’ nor ‘exposed to danger’ had been clarified by any Review Conference. Some states indicated that Article VII should be regarded as a sub-set of the Article X issues while others indicated they were a distinct set of issues – no government is likely to have at its disposal the resources to respond to a severe biological attack and so the concept of receiving assistance applies to developed as well as developing countries. A suggestion was made that guidelines should be drawn up between international organizations and States Parties as to how any assistance might be provided although others noted that such guidelines might be difficult to draft as they would have to cover a wide variety of possible situations.

The Article VIII discussion had as its dominant theme the UN Secretary-General’s Investigative Mechanism as the article specifically deals with the Geneva Protocol and much, but not all, of the documentation relating to this mechanism mentions the Protocol. While there had been a proposal to move text on the mechanism from the Article VI section to this section, other delegates disagreed with this suggestion. BWC Article IX calls for negotiations on a Chemical Weapons Convention, a task that has been completed. There were, however, some interventions noting the importance of the convergence between chemistry and biology and the implications this might have for controlling the misuse of these sciences.

The Article X discussion had two distinct themes. The NAM delegations were very focused on the issues contained in their working paper on the subject (WP.26) while a number of Western delegations took time to outline activities that their countries had undertaken that were relevant to this Article. Cuba, on behalf of the NAM States Parties, indicated that there would be more from the group to come later. Many delegations made reference to the background paper on Article X implementation (INF.8).

At the end of the day, the Chair of the Committee, Ambassador Percaya (Indonesia), circulated a compilation of suggestions that had put forward for inclusion in or amendment of the article-by-article review section of the final document. The starting point for this is the relevant part of the final document from the Sixth Review Conference.

Third and fourth informal plenary topics – CBMs and assistance and cooperation

Two subjects were under discussion in the informal plenary on Friday afternoon. As with the earlier informal plenaries, the aim was not to come to any immediate conclusions, but to encourage discussion. Key starting points for the discussion on CBMs were the working papers by Belgium, WP.6; Germany/Norway/Switzerland, WP.9; Germany, WP.14; South Africa, WP.19; Norway/Switzerland/New Zealand, WP. 21; and Canada, WP.25.

The key questions being considered were whether there was a need to look at specific proposals to amend the existing CBM forms, if so, this could be done within the Review Conference itself; or whether there was a need to take a more lengthy review of the overall CBM process, in which case there would not be time within the Conference to do this and so this would have to be part of a new inter-sessional process. One difficulty with adding possible subjects for a new inter-sessional process is that these subjects might compete with each other for attention.

As the discussion of assistance and cooperation was thought likely to continue into another informal plenary this will be covered in a later daily report.

Side Events

Three side events were held on Friday – one in the breakfast slot and two at lunchtime. The morning event was convened by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) <<http://www.sipri.org>> on the subject of ‘Addressing Future Challenges to the BTWC in Connection with S&T Developments’ and featured presentations from John Hart, Ralph Trapp and Peter Clevestig.

One of the lunchtime events was convened by the Research Group on Biological Arms Control <http://www.biological-arms-control.org/projects_trademonitoring.html>, based in Hamburg, on ‘Monitoring the International Trade in Biological Dual-Use Equipment’. Presentations were given by Izaak Wing (World Customs Organization) and Gunnar Jeremias. The event was chaired by Iris Hunger. The other event was convened by the delegation of the United States on that country’s work on Article X. An introduction was given by Ambassador Laura Kennedy and presentations were given by Kathryn Insley (Office of Cooperative Threat Reduction, Department of State [DoS]), Kathryn Harris (Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Global Strategic Affairs), Scott Dowell (Division of Global Disease Detection and Emergency Response, CDC), Michael Johnson (Fogarty International Center, National Institutes of Health), Selwyn Jamison (WMD Directorate, FBI), and Rebecca Katz (Biological Policy Staff, DoS).

Reflections at the end of the first week

There has been a positive atmosphere in the Review Conference in its first week, but most of what has happened so far is exchange of views and outlining of positions. The trade-offs and compromises will start this week and that’s when the real character of this Conference will become apparent. Most delegations have arrived well prepared but there seem to be some delays in finalizing some positions. However, the situation looks better than five years ago – at the end of the first week of the Sixth Review Conference, there were very few suggested texts for the final document from the NAM states, these were provided a few days later. This time there are many such contributions in the Committee of the Whole compilation. It is notable, however, that some of the members of the NAM group have undergone profound changes in their economies in recent years and, as part of that, their reliance on the life sciences has developed. This makes the group much more diverse than in the past, which may make it more challenging for the group to reach common positions in some areas.

This is the sixth report from the Seventh Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 5 to 22 December 2011 in Geneva. The reports are designed to help people who are not in Geneva to follow the proceedings. Copies of these reports and those from the earlier meetings are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>>.

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