

Tuesday 28th November 2006

Behind closed doors: Describing the elephant

A community of blind men once heard that an extraordinary beast called an elephant had been brought into the country. Since they did not know what it looked like and had never heard its name, they resolved to obtain a picture, and the knowledge they desired, by feeling the beast - the only possibility that was open to them!

They went in search of the elephant, and when they had found it, they felt its body. One touched its leg, the other a tusk, the third an ear, and in the belief that they now knew the elephant, they returned home. But when they were questioned by the other blind men, their answers differed. The one who had felt the leg maintained that the elephant was nothing other than a pillar, extremely rough to the touch, and yet strangely soft. The one who had caught hold of the tusk denied this and described the elephant as, hard and smooth, with nothing soft or rough about it, more over the beast was by no means as stout as a pillar, but rather had the shape of a post.

The third, who had held the ear in his hands, spoke: 'By my faith, it is both soft and rough'. Thus he agreed with one of the others, but went on to say: 'Nevertheless, it is neither like a post nor a pillar, but like a broad, thick piece of leather'. Each was right in a certain sense, since each of them communicated that part of the elephant he had comprehended, but none was able describe the elephant as it really was; for all three of them were unable to comprehend the entire form of the elephant.

Monday, the sixth day of the Sixth Review Conference for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) consisted of two sessions of the Committee of the Whole (CoW), both held behind closed doors. The CoW is carrying out an article-by-article review of the Convention. Unlike activities in the CoW in the first week which were simply statements of policy, Monday saw an attempt to find the limits of acceptability of language proposals for each article. By the end of the day the CoW had reached Article VI, having discussed Articles I to V without reaching consensus on language for any of the articles.

Just like the traditional tale above, participants in the closed sessions describe what is going on in the meeting room in substantially contradictory ways. It is quite possible that there is no individual who has a clear idea of what the whole Review Conference 'elephant' looks like. It is also becoming a concern to some delegates that they feel they do not have a full picture of what is going.

Some activity in the meeting room involved all States Parties. For example, Cuba (as convenor of the non-aligned group of States), Finland (for the EU) and Pakistan presented proposed texts in writing for consideration. A number of other textual suggestions were made verbally in the room, but these proved hard to track by many delegations. In the margins, ad hoc coalitions of States discreetly circulated possible text that might be the basis of consensus on such subjects as the inter-sessional process, universality and future action plans.

The operation of the group structures

One aspect of this Review Conference that differs from earlier BTWC meetings is that the traditional group structures appear to be operating too slowly to contend with the pace of the Conference. Once new text is agreed by a group it is sometimes out of date by the time it is available for consideration by all States Parties. Part of this may be due to the increasing role of the EU in BTWC activities – once the EU has come to a policy conclusion, there can be little flexibility in the position without taking the question back to the 25 Member States. There is also a clear tension between experts and diplomats across a number of EU delegations which seems to stem from the speed of activities within the Review Conference.

There are three regional groupings that operate in the BTWC context: the ‘Western European and Other States Group’ (commonly referred to as the Western Group); the ‘Group of Eastern European States’ (commonly referred to as the Eastern Group); and the ‘Group of Non Aligned Movement and other States’ (commonly referred to as the NAM group). Each of these groupings derives from the Cold War era. A quirk of the modern era is that EU past and potential expansion has meant that a number of eastern group members are also members, or potential accession candidates, of the EU. This includes the co-ordinator of the eastern group, Hungary, which acceded to the EU in 2004. This makes the EU a major player in two of the three groupings that are used for organizing BTWC meeting activities.

In parallel with the changing role of the EU, and perhaps influenced by it, comes the emergence of new smaller active groupings of states in the BTWC context. A new Latin American grouping – Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay – presented a number of joint working papers (see report #1) as did the JACKSNNZ (occasionally referred to as Jacksons 7) – Japan, Australia, Canada, South Korea, Switzerland, Norway and New Zealand. They basically represent the Western Group without the EU and the United States.

Will these developments challenge the existing group structure?

Friday’s general debate

Report #6 mentioned the resumed general debate on Friday without indicating what happened within it. Two statements were made in the public plenary by Saudi Arabia and Italy. The Saudi statement described various relevant national implementation measures introduced by the government. Saudi Arabia, a BTWC State Party since 1972, also said ‘the Kingdom is urging that all States that have not yet acceded to the Convention to take the necessary steps to do so’. The Italian statement was very general.

NGO activities

Monday’s lunchtime seminar was convened by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) on the topic of ‘Bio Research in the United States – Emerging Level IV Labs’. Further information about the activities of WILPF can be found at <<http://disarm.wilpf.org/>> and <<http://www.wilpf.ch/>>.

This is the seventh report from the Sixth five-yearly Review Conference for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 20 November to 8 December 2006 in Geneva. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP).

These reports are available on the BWPP website via a page dedicated to the Review Conference – <<http://www.bwpp.org/6RevCon/6thRevConResources.html>>. Details of how to subscribe to the reports via e-mail are included there.

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