

BTWC Review Conference: Ready for Opening

Monday 20th November 2006

Following months of preparation, the Sixth five-yearly Review Conference for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) will assemble on Monday morning. The conference will follow the Provisional Agenda agreed by the Preparatory Committee in April.

Ambassador Masood Khan (Pakistan), the President-designate of the Review Conference, has circulated to States Parties a draft programme of work to put into practice the Provisional Agenda. The conference is scheduled to start with an address by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and then to meet in general debate for two days. The Review Conference would then enter into an article-by-article review in the guise of the "Committee of the Whole" (CoW). The CoW sessions would be punctuated by a number of plenary meetings to deal with cross-cutting issues that do not easily fall into the article-by-article review. During the middle week of the conference, the "Drafting Committee" would be convened to translate the work of the conference into a final report and declaration. The Chairman-designate of the Committee of the Whole is Ambassador Doru Costea (Romania) and the Chairman-designate of the Drafting Committee is Ambassador Knut Langeland (Norway).

Background to the Review Conference

The Sixth Review Conference offers the opportunity for the States Parties to carry out a full review of the purposes and the provisions of the convention, taking into account relevant scientific and technological developments. The previous conference in 2001 (resumed in 2002) was overshadowed by the suspension earlier in the year of negotiations in the Ad Hoc Group (the body negotiating legally-binding measures to strengthen the BTWC) and did not reach consensus on a review of the Convention.

A number of issues are still politically sensitive. The subject of possible verification measures remains controversial. The bargain embodied in Article X of the BTWC (which relates to peaceful scientific and technological aspects) is seen as important by some states but as less significant by others. Proposals may re-emerge to amend the BTWC to explicitly prohibit use, notwithstanding a consensus Review Conference declaration in 1996 that use is implicitly prohibited by the Convention. There are a number of perspectives on whether the BTWC would benefit from some form of formal central support arrangements to promote implementation.

Conference Documents

A number of working papers and papers outlining scientific and technological developments have been submitted by States Parties. Some background documents have been prepared by the conference secretariat. Copies are available via the official BWC website at <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>> (click on the 'Sixth Review Conference' link). Papers are available in the UN official languages and there is also a page containing papers in their language of submission while this translation is being carried out.

By the Friday before the Review Conference (17th November), seven working papers had been submitted by the European Union collectively (the authorship of each was allocated to EU member states but each reflects the collective views of the EU) on biosafety & biosecurity, national implementation, Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), Article X, universality, co-ordinated implementation and the inter-sessional process. Five had been submitted by a group of Latin American states – Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay – on universality, Article X, a follow-on work programme, Confidence-Building Measures and a support facility. Japan (national implementation), Australia (universality), South Korea (universality), Switzerland (CBMs), Norway (support unit) and New Zealand (inter-sessional process) submitted papers as part of the informal 'JACKSNNZ' (pronounced 'jacksons') grouping, the seventh member of which is Canada, to pursue a like-minded approach to the Review Conference. Canada also submitted a revised version of its working paper on an accountability framework which had been presented to the Preparatory Committee in April.

As can be seen by the topics chosen, there are substantial common threads running through the contributions of these various States Parties. Similar problems are identified and similar solutions are proposed. While the papers on similar themes, such as CBMs or support for national implementation, may have some differences in emphasis, there are no substantive contradictions between them.

Papers on scientific and technical developments have been submitted by Argentina, Australia, China, Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.

More working papers and scientific and technological developments papers are expected to be presented during the Review Conference.

This is the first of a series of daily reports from the Sixth 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) see <<http://www.bwpp.org>> for more information on the project.

These daily reports are available on the BWPP website via a page dedicated to the Review Conference – <<http://www.bwpp.org/6RevCon/6thRevConResources.html>> – or via e-mail each day by sending a blank e-mail message to <bwpp-revcon-report-subscribe@yahoogroups.com> – this mailing list will only be used to distribute these reports and will be locked to prevent messages being sent from other sources.

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