

Friday 24th November 2006

Cross-cutting issues begin: Length of new inter-sessional meetings discussed

The fourth day of the Sixth Review Conference for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) involved a morning informal plenary session dealing with the first of the cross-cutting issues followed by an afternoon session of the Committee of the Whole (CoW). Russia, as a depositary State of the BTWC, informed the Conference that it had received a request to amend the Convention in relation to use of biological weapons from Iran (see *Report #4*).

The Review Conference is still at the stage of airing issues rather than seeking consensus so many topics have been discussed without bringing them to a conclusion.

Cross-cuttings issues

As described in *Report #1*, the Review Conference President Ambassador Masood Khan (Pakistan) wanted to intersperse the CoW sessions with a number of informal plenary sessions to deal with cross-cutting issues that do not easily fall into the article-by article review.

Much of Thursday morning was taken up with discussion of how any follow-on inter-sessional process might be carried out during 2007-10. The 2003-05 procedure was to have a two-week 'Meeting of Experts' (MX) in the middle of the year with a one-week 'Meeting of States Parties' (MSP) towards the end of the year. Some states have found providing delegates for three weeks of meetings per year burdensome. It has been suggested that the MX and MSP could be held back-to-back – which would also save on air fares – with one week devoted to each type of meeting.

A number of costs and benefits have to be balanced. Meetings for three weeks can cover more ground than those lasting two. But if some States Parties cannot afford to release key personnel for three weeks, but could for two, then the number of States Parties attending the meetings might be affected. Holding the meetings at separate times of the year allows delegates to take things they have learned back to their countries after the Meeting of Experts, work out how they apply in their situation, and then attend the Meeting of States

Parties to exchange experiences of how to deal with any outstanding issues. Back-to-back meetings would not allow this.

A possibility would be to change the pattern of meetings each year depending on the subject matter being discussed. While this is a pragmatic approach, it requires a number of additional decisions to be taken instead of a simple decision to have them all follow the same pattern.

Other cross-cutting issues earmarked for discussion in an informal paper circulated to States Parties by the President are: the results of the 2003-05 inter-sessional process; confidence-building measures; national implementation, universalisation; and implementation support.

The President circulated another informal paper collating the suggestions made for topics for inter-sessional meetings. The paper, essentially a series of bullet points, also highlights some practical questions not yet discussed about how a new inter-sessional process should be organized. Examples of these questions include: should one or two topics be covered each year? Should the meetings be able to come to decisions? With four years of meetings, but three groupings of States Parties, how will the allocation of chairs be done equitably? It is likely that the questions in the paper will not be discussed in a single session and will have implications for a number of issues discussed in various sessions.

Committee of the Whole

The task for the CoW is to carry out an article-by-article review of the Convention. Thursday saw a return to Articles VII to X issues as the BTWC NAM group had wanted more time to prepare on certain aspects and so did not want to cover them in Wednesday's sessions. The group promised a working paper on Article X which it hoped to have ready for Friday morning.

The session also saw the scope of coverage of Article VII of the Convention being raised. Under Article VII, States Parties undertake to assist each other if any of them 'exposed to danger as a result of violation of the Convention'. How would this relate to an attack on a State Party by a terrorist group? Would there have been a violation of the Convention? How does this relate to an attack by a State that is not a party to the BTWC?

NGO activities

The Thursday lunchtime seminar was convened by the Center for Biosecurity at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center to hear a presentation on 'Biodefense Research, High Containment Laboratories, and Scientific Response: Opportunities and Challenges for the BWC'. Details of the Center can be found at <<http://www.upmc-biosecurity.org/>>.

This is the fifth report 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).

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.

For press queries or any other questions relating to the Review Conference, please contact Dr Jean Pascal Zanders (+41 79 582 4454 or <jpzanders@bwpp.org>). For technical questions relating to these reports during the Review Conference, please contact Richard Guthrie (+41 76 507 1026 or <rguthrie@bwpp.org>).