

Wednesday 29th November 2006

‘First reading’ completed: Article X consultations to continue

The seventh day of the Sixth Review Conference for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) concluded what was described by the President as the ‘first reading’ of the article-by-article review of the Convention. In many parliaments, a ‘first reading’ is essentially an agreement in principle on the contents of a draft measure with the opportunity to hammer out details of the final text during later stages.

The Committee of the Whole (CoW) met on Tuesday morning and the afternoon was dedicated to consultations. A short open plenary session happened late in the day. The CoW and consultations were both carried out behind closed doors. It also emerged that 2006 has seen a record number of Confidence-Building Measure (CBM) returns.

Conference Room activities

During the morning session of the CoW there were a number of divergent views on Article X issues. The scheduled afternoon session of the CoW was suspended in order to allow for consultation on this article to take place in a separate meeting. Article X relates to the peaceful uses of the biological sciences.

During Tuesday’s short open plenary, the Chairman of the CoW, Ambassador Doru Costea (Romania), reported on progress being made in the article-by-article review. He indicated that further meetings of the informal group carrying out consultations would be needed and stated that a new draft text would be issued before the next meeting of the CoW.

The President of the Review Conference, Ambassador Masood Khan (Pakistan), indicated that consultations for putting together possible consensus text on an implementation support unit and on the inter-sessional process 2003-05 were being carried out by representatives of Argentina and Norway, respectively. Both are expected to report on Wednesday.

Implementation support unit issues

There is an emerging consensus that there should be a BTWC Implementation Support Unit based in Geneva. The most common size referred to is for this unit to consist of three persons. This unit would absorb the current conference/meeting support functions of the existing BTWC staff, which is slightly less than two full-time staff positions.

Compared with implementation support efforts elsewhere, this is an extremely modest provision. The efforts to support the Action Plans in relation to the Chemical Weapons Convention have involved more than two full-time personnel as well as having other staff resources available on a temporary basis for specific tasks from that convention's implementing organisation. The support costs for the committee established by UN Security Council resolution 1540 were not far short of US\$2 million per financial year. While these other cases differ in a number of important respects, most significantly in terms of remit and expected actions, they illustrate the expected cost-effectiveness of possible BTWC-related developments. However, care must be taken not to mandate an implementation support unit with more tasks than could be carried out with the available staff time.

Although the United States had been the State Party to be convinced about the creation of an implementation support unit, this situation has now been largely resolved and there are now other States Parties, such as Japan, raising concerns about costs.

Record Confidence-Building Measure (CBM) returns

The submission by Cyprus by of a CBM return in the week before the Review Conference had been seen as significant as it completed a target to get all 25 EU member states to submit returns during 2006. This submission turns out to have an additional significance as it is the fifty-third of the year – a record number. The previous highest annual total was in 1996, during which 52 States Parties submitted returns.

With a month to go before the end of the year, more returns may be submitted.

Italian statement

The Italian statement made on Friday and referred to in passing in report #7 highlighted working paper WP.22 on Bioterrorism, submitted by Italy on behalf of the EU. This paper recommends that a future inter-sessional work programme should include the subject with the aim of reviewing all actions undertaken in this field and focussing on whether further measures are necessary to deal with it at the national and international levels, and in particular within the BTWC.

NGO activities

Tuesday's lunchtime seminar was convened by the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, Washington, DC, and the Research Group for Biological Arms Control, University of Hamburg on the topic of 'Strengthening the BWC by Enhancing Transparency: the CBMs and Beyond'. The seminar also included a contribution from the School of Humanities and Social Sciences; University of Exeter. Further information about these projects can be found at <http://www.armscontrolcenter.org/>, <http://www.biological-arms-control.org/> and <http://www.projects.ex.ac.uk/codesofconduct/BiosecuritySeminar/>, respectively.

This is the eighth 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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