

Friday 17th December 2010

The Final Day: conclusion of the meeting

The 2010 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) completed its programme of work on Friday 10 December including agreement on a final report of the MSP.

Reaching agreement on the final report of the meeting

Following the comments in the proceedings on Thursday on the draft substantive paragraphs for the report of the MSP, a new draft of these paragraphs was made available to delegations at 9.00 in the morning. This gave delegates about 90 minutes to go through the amended text before the start of proceedings.

After a short session, during which most states taking the floor indicated broad acceptance of the text but with some suggestions for amendments, the Chair, Ambassador Pedro Oyarce of Chile, adjourned the session again to allow the text to be updated to take into account the comments made. None of the suggested changes caused too much difficulty for other States Parties and a further iteration was brought forward in the late the morning.

On the budget for 2011, which includes the costs of the Seventh Review Conference and the costs of the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) for the year, the President-designate of the Seventh Review Conference, Ambassador Paul van den IJssel of the Netherlands, informed the meeting of the results of his consultations on the matter. He noted that there had been limited possibilities to save money and a suggestion that had been made not to produce Summary Records of the formal sessions did not achieve consensus. Japan took the floor to thank the ISU for its 'detailed explanation' of the costings provided during the consultations. The budget was then adopted by the meeting.

There then followed some closing remarks from the Chair. A number of delegates took the floor, mostly to thank the Chair, other delegations, the ISU, the conference support staff and the interpreters. The meeting was closed at 1pm.

Side Event

There was one side event on Friday, held at lunchtime, convened by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) which included the launch of its new BioWeapons Monitor. The panel was introduced by Marie Chevrier. Presentations were given by Angela Woodward on the current BWPP activities, by Iris Hunger on the BWPP project on the Review Conference, and Richard Guthrie on the daily reports. The four authors of the BioWeapons Monitor sections on Brazil (Jack Woodall), Germany (Iris Hunger), India (Animesh Roul) and Kenya (Eucharika Kenya) then presented the results of their research.

Reflections

A conscious effort is taken in writing these daily summaries to report the facts and not give opinion. However, there are many times that the question is raised – 'so what do you think

about what happened?’ While the role of a commentator should be to try to report what is happening in an impartial manner, there are times that this style of reporting does not convey some of the atmosphere of meetings. The following are some personal reflections that do not necessarily represent anyone’s views other than the author’s own.

For a meeting that had been conducted in a very positive atmosphere, the speed at which disagreements emerged was surprising. While it did not take long for consensus to return, it might not be so easy to deal with such rapid change during the Review Conference.

Some of the consequences of positions taken were also surprising. Countries that have been amongst the most vocal in advocating the importance of Article X of the Convention on general cooperation and assistance issues and Article VII on international assistance in the event of the use of biological or toxin weapons were those who were pressing hardest for the final report of the MSP not to use such terms as ‘the States Parties agreed on the value of ...’. This makes the 2010 report stand out from those of the other MSPs since 2006 as the language used is much more muted.

The choice of language may be influenced also by the disparate views on what the future should hold for the Convention. Some states that wish to see a new verification arrangement for the BWC argue that more pressure is brought to bear for this if the Convention is seen as the central focal point of any response to possible use of biological or toxin weapons. From this perspective, the UN Secretary-General’s investigation mechanism is thus a distraction from the possibilities of having effective mechanisms embedded within the BWC itself. Yet, if the Convention should be at the centre of any response to an alleged use of biological or toxin weapons before there was the possibility of new arrangements being negotiated would there be any costs to this?

If, as suggested by some delegations, an emergency meeting of BWC States Parties were needed to trigger an investigation, this could cause delays that may have a cost in human suffering and perhaps further deaths. A key element of international efforts to control biological weapons has to be efforts to reduce the impact of any such use as a reduced impact would make such use less attractive to potential perpetrators. Moreover, different diseases require different responses and different treatments. It will be vital, in the hours or days immediately following an attack, that any infective agent being used is able to be identified with high levels of confidence. Unfortunately, as recognised in the discussions in the MSP, the capacities that exist to carry out this kind of identification vary considerably between countries. Where the capacities do not exist within a country where an alleged event has taken place, this will require external resources to help with identification. Any international response will require solid information on which to base decisions such as medicines to be supplied. A prompt investigation may be vital to prompt delivery of assistance.

Another point raised in relation to investigations was that the memberships of global international instruments are not the same – some countries are parties to some and not others. In theory, an investigation of alleged use by a BWC State Party could be triggered by a non-party to the Convention. This caused some delegations some concern. However, if universalization is an achievable goal, then in the longer run this should matter less and less.

Exemplifying the developments within the EU following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, for the first time at a BWC meeting the holder of the rotating EU Presidency, Belgium, had a ‘European Union’ nameplate in front of its desk as well as the country name. This was in addition to the EU nameplate in the international organizations seating area.

This is the sixth and final report from the Meeting of States Parties for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which was held from 6 to 10 December 2010 in Geneva. The reports are designed to help people who are not in Geneva to follow the proceedings. Copies are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>>.

The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). Financial assistance for this project has been provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Sweden.

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