

Wednesday 27th April 2016

The opening day of the Preparatory Committee

The opening of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) for the Eighth Review Conference of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) on Tuesday morning marked the formal start of the Convention's five-yearly review process.

Procedural matters

The meeting was opened with Mary Soliman, Acting Director of the Geneva Branch of the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs, presiding over the formal adoption of Ambassador György Molnár of Hungary as Chair of the PrepCom. In his opening remarks, Ambassador Molnár noted that much of the work of this PrepCom would be to underpin the procedural aspects of the Conference; work that was neither glamorous nor exciting, but was vital for a successful outcome.

A number of what are sometimes referred to as 'housekeeping' decisions were taken, such as the formal adoption of the PrepCom agenda, that decisions should be taken by consensus, the use of all UN official languages, participation of signatory states, participation of Israel as an observer, participation of the European Union as an inter-governmental organization and the participation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). All followed relevant precedents.

Two Vice-Chairs for the PrepCom were appointed: Ambassador Boujemâa Delmi of Algeria and Ambassador Michael Biontino of Germany. Following precedent, the former will become Chair of the Drafting Committee for the Eighth Review Conference and the latter the Chair of the Committee of the Whole.

Implementation Support Unit (ISU) Chief Daniel Feakes noted that two offers for sponsorship for Review Conference delegates who would be otherwise unable to attend were in the pipeline with other pledges in preparation. He also noted that 61 Confidence-Building Measures returns had been received so far this year, 28 of which were public.

The general exchange of views

A new development for this PrepCom was the inclusion of agenda item 5 'General exchange of views'. Ambassador Molnár, on introducing this item, offered specific encouragement to delegates to bring forward new ideas and to ask questions to clarify or elaborate on the suggestions being made; in other words, to make it an interactive session rather than a usual plenary in which statements are listened to without response. He emphasized that no decisions would be made on any proposal until the Review Conference itself, and noted that the sheer number of proposals that had been put forward in writing before the PrepCom indicated interest in strengthening the Convention.

Statements were taken in three tranches: the first was for regional group statements within which Iran spoke for the non-aligned; the second was for States Parties with specific proposals: India, Finland, United States, Russia, UK, France, China, and Switzerland; and the third was for more general statements: Iran (national), Indonesia, Norway, Italy, Australia, Ireland, Japan, Germany, Canada, Morocco, Mexico, Cuba,

Ukraine, Pakistan, Armenia, Belarus, Netherlands, Peru and the Republic of Korea. The statement from the European Union was taken at the end of the third tranche.

Many of the statements made references to Working Papers submitted to the PrepCom or in recent years of the last inter-sessional process. It is notable that at least 12 Working Papers have so far been submitted to this PrepCom meeting; no similar papers were submitted to the PrepComs in 2006 or 2011. With so many papers submitted, there is not space to detail them here. All are on the ISU website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>.

With many topics being discussed, this daily report will focus on the review of scientific and technological (S&T) issues with other issues under discussion being carried over to the final daily report which will cover Wednesday's activities.

There was a broad consensus that there is a need for a more effective means for the BWC States Parties to review S&T developments and that any form of review process would need to be sustainable (i.e., not just a one-off event). There was common ground on the need for a review process to provide relevant information in a timely manner that can allow policy processes to keep pace with S&T developments, but, during this discussion, no clear common ground on how to turn this into practical action. The relevance of S&T developments for a variety of BWC articles was noted, so that an effective S&T review process would enhance many aspects of the Convention.

Some of elements of the proposals called for open-ended arrangements in which experts from any State Party that wished to participate could be part of the process. This has advantages of inclusivity but has financial and logistical implications. It was noted that inclusivity could be hindered as some States Parties may not be able to afford the financial costs of sending experts to meetings. There were also proposals for a committee or board of a selected number of eminent experts. This would inevitably be less inclusive than a review mechanism open to all, but could operate with greater flexibility and at a lower cost. Selection of such a committee would have to have an agreed process and any selection process could have political implications. Some delegates noted that inclusivity included issues around diversity of perspectives, not only on technical and political matters but also, by implication, cultural and economic factors.

There were many calls that any review process should be led by governments with technical input from relevant experts. While interventions indicated that some delegations thought there could be a clear distinction between the technical and the political, others indicated that the point that these two meet can be complicated – technical issues sit within a political context and political issues in an area such as the control on biological weapons sit within a technical context.

A number of delegations noted that it was useful to identify where proposals have common elements as well as to identify differences so that common ground can be sought between now and November with a chance to examine these issues again during the August PrepCom meeting.

Side Event

There was a lunchtime side event convened by Russia under the title of 'Strengthening the Biological Weapons Convention' to discuss the Working Papers that delegation has submitted on 'Operationalising mobile biomedical units to deliver protection against biological weapons, investigate their alleged use, and to suppress epidemics of various etiology' and 'Proposal for the establishment of a Scientific Advisory Committee'. Presentations were given by Vladimir Ladanov (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Yulia Demina and Vyacheslav Smolenskiy (both of the Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Well-Being [Rospotrebnadzor]).

This is the second report from the April meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the Eighth BWC Review Conference. These reports have been produced for all official BWC meetings since the Sixth Review Conference in 2006 by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) and are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org>> and <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>>.

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