

Thursday 22nd December 2011

Winter solstice - a long shortest day: working into the night ...

The Seventh Review Conference of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) continued on Wednesday on the shortest day of the year in the northern hemisphere – the winter solstice. However, inside the meetings, the day was the longest of the Review Conference, extending well past midnight.

The morning consisted of an informal plenary discussion on the budget and on the revised Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) forms with the afternoon consisting of a further review of the standing agenda items for the inter-sessional programme (ISP). Work continued into the evening with informal consultations on budgetary issues followed by further consultations on the article-by-article review, including the Solemn declaration. These latter consultations continued until 2am, finding agreement on most outstanding issues. The consultations will resume on Thursday morning and optimism was expressed that this will resolve the outstanding matter(s), enabling a text of all parts of the Final Document to be presented to the Review Conference on its final day.

The President of the Review Conference, Ambassador Paul van den IJssel (Netherlands), informed the plenary of details of the outcome of the consultations the night before on the ISP. Three topics had been identified as standing agenda items. The Meeting of Experts and the Meeting of States Parties would each be of five days duration, The Chair of the meetings each year would be assisted by two Vice-Chairs from the other regional groups. Language on the rules of the meetings would be that from the Sixth Review Conference.

As with all of the areas under discussion, while there might be outline agreement on individual parts, such as the CBM modifications, there will be one collective decision to adopt the whole package of proposals. Therefore, nothing can be understood to have been agreed until the whole package has been put together and considered as a complete set.

Budgetary questions

Finance has been an underlying theme of this Review Conference with the global economic situation making financial decisions more difficult than might have been expected. It is clear that resource restraints have been very influential on the decisions of individual States Parties on their views of what should be in the ISP, for example.

Although the proposed budget contained an increase in staffing for the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) from three to five, it would be lower in 2012 than in 2011. This is because the costs of BWC meetings and the ISU are wrapped up in the same budget and the costs of the Review Conference in 2011 are greater than for the meetings in 2012. Concerns were raised about the impact of exchange rate fluctuations, about which it appeared there was little that could be done. Questions were also raised about what grades members of staff would be appointed to.

After lunch a paper was circulated illustrating the expected contributions from individual States Parties under the proposed budget. This had been requested during the morning discussion. This paper was heavily caveated as it was not an official budget

document but it was provided for the purposes of guidance only in order to illustrate roughly what size of contributions might be expected. In light of the earlier discussions on thresholds, the proposal for which has been dropped, this provides some interesting data, including that 26 States Parties would pay something like only US\$19 per year in contributions if the budget was adopted as proposed.

By the end of the normal working day, and before the evening consultations began, it was becoming clear that there was not support for the requested budgeted. It is understood that a budget agreement has been reached in the consultations but that this will have to be taken back to delegations for consideration in the morning.

Confidence-Building Measures

The consultations on CBM forms had been facilitated by Paul Wilson (Australia) at the request of the President. The results of these consultations were presented to the informal plenary during the morning.

The modifications to the CBM forms were primarily to simplify them in order to reduce the burden on States Parties in preparing their submissions. In some cases the proposed changes remove duplications, such as where similar information is provided by a government on disease outbreaks under the CBMs and to the World Health Organization. Other proposed changes include the deletion of Form D and the addition of declarations of legislation, regulation and other measures in relation to biosafety and biosecurity under Form E. During plenary exchanges on the proposed changes to the forms and the proposed language to be inserted into the forward looking section of the Final Document it became clear that there were a few outstanding issues. After lunch, the plenary was informed that the consultations had successfully resolved the outstanding issues.

Topics for standing agenda items

The agreed titles for the three standing agenda topics were reported back to the plenary in the morning by the President. They are 'Cooperation and assistance, with a particular focus on strengthening cooperation and assistance under Article X', 'Review of developments in the field of science and technology related to the Convention', and 'Strengthening national implementation'.

The details of the agenda items were discussed during the afternoon in an informal plenary. As with the discussions on Tuesday on the topics, the text for the first two items prompted few disagreements as they had been derived from the efforts of facilitators. A few minor changes were made, such as reordering the sequence of topics to be discussed under the science and technology agenda item. Ambassador Sergiy Komisarenko (Ukraine) won the Review Conference award for fastest facilitation, zipping around the room to reach consensus on the reordering in barely 20 minutes!

Official Documents

After a gap of a couple of days in which no new official documents were circulated, a number of documents were issued on Wednesday. New documents include estimated costs of the ISP, including the ISU (BWC/CONF.VII/4); Report of the Committee of the Whole (BWC/CONF.VII/5); the list of participants (INF.11); and a new working paper from Iran on 'The full, effective and non-discriminatory implementation of Article X' (WP.29).

Please note: there will be a fifteenth report covering the final day of the Review Conference that will be e-mailed out and placed on the website below

This is the fourteenth report from the Seventh Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 5 to 22 December 2011 in Geneva. The reports are designed to help people who are not in Geneva to follow the proceedings. Copies of these reports and those from the earlier meetings are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>>.

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