

Tuesday 5th April 2022

The opening day of the second session of the Preparatory Committee

The second session of the Preparatory Committee for the Ninth Review Conference for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) opened in Salle XIX on Monday morning – the first BWC meeting since the start of the pandemic without plastic screens between delegates or numerical limits to room occupancy. However, face masks remained obligatory. The proceedings were presided over by the two Vice-Chairs – Tancredi Francese (Italy) and Florian Antohi (Romania) – as there has been no further progress on appointing a Chair (who would also thus be President-designate of the Review Conference). Before the meeting started formally, the Vice-Chairs invited participants to observe a minute's silence 'to pay tribute to the victims of the conflict in Ukraine'.

The opening formalities were relatively brief as many decisions, such as the adoption of the agenda, had been taken at the first session held on 20 December 2021. The Vice-Chairs informed the meeting that 22 experts from 22 states parties were in attendance through the sponsorship scheme operated by the BWC's Implementation Support Unit with financial support from Canada, France and the European Union.

The general exchange of views

Before opening the floor for this agenda item, Vice-Chair Francese noted that it was not a general debate such as happened at the Meeting of States Parties (MSP) and which will happen at the Review Conference. He suggested delegations should frame statements in the context of preparations for the Review Conference. While ideas could be raised at any time, he urged delegates to offer more detailed discussion on particular points during the article-by-article and cross cutting issues that would come later in the week. In order to allow many delegations to take the floor in the available time, Vice-Chair Francese gave a time limit of 7 minutes for group statements and 5 minutes for national statements. There were a number of occasions during the exchange of views in which he had to ask speakers to bring their comments to a conclusion to avoid going too far over time.

Group statements were given by the Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction (delivered by Germany), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (delivered by Cambodia) and the Non-Aligned/NAM Group (delivered by Azerbaijan). National statements were given by Malawi, Georgia, UK, Dominican Republic, USA, South Africa, Ukraine, Philippines, Russia, India, Kenya, France, Switzerland, Sweden, Indonesia, Italy, Brazil, Iran, Chile, Panama, Mexico, Spain, State of Palestine, Republic of Korea, Japan, Netherlands, China, Germany, Poland, Belgium, Canada, Algeria, Nigeria, Colombia, Venezuela, Austria, Argentina, Cuba, Norway, Australia, Ireland, Peru, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Ecuador. The only statement by an international organization was delivered by the European Union. Speakers are listed in the order they spoke in each category, although there was some switching between categories during the day owing to availability of speakers at different times. The civil society groups addressing the meeting after these statements, some via recorded video, were: the Verification Research, Training and Information Centre (VERTIC); BioSecure; Council for Strategic Risks; Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security; London

Metropolitan University; Maat for Peace, Development, and Human Rights; and King's College London. At the end of the day there were a number of rights of reply exercised.

The geo-political situation entered the room during the first statement delivered when Russia called for a point of order twice during the Global Partnership statement. On both occasions, Russia suggested that the statement, which included a condemnation of the war in Ukraine, described as a 'serious breach of international law', was not about preparations for the Review Conference but was a political statement. Vice-Chair Francese noted that delegations could raise points they felt were relevant to preparations. Many statements during the day condemned the invasion.

Overseas laboratory allegations – A number of statements connected the allegations made by Russia to potential retrospective claims for justification for military action. Terms such as 'false', 'spurious' and 'disinformation' were used to describe the allegations. Russia denied this, claiming the allegations were 'well founded' and that the alleged activities constituted breaches of Articles I and IV. Russia said it reserved the right to raise the allegations through Article V or Article VI of the Convention. Izumi Nakamitsu, the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, was quoted by some delegations. Speaking of Ukraine to the UN Security Council on 11 March, she had said: 'The United Nations is not aware of any biological weapons programmes'. A lunchtime side event was convened by Germany, Ukraine and the USA in response to the allegations.

Verification and compliance – a number of delegations suggested the Convention would be strengthened by the addition of verification measures, most of these referred to a legally binding instrument of some form. Some suggested that verification arrangements might have been useful to deal with the Russian allegations. The USA, criticised by some as the country stopping progress on verification, referred back to the Jenkins statement at the MSP that specific measures to strengthen the Convention should be adopted by the Review Conference at the same time as forming a temporary expert working group to enhance confidence and promote compliance.

Science and technology (S&T) review – The broad support for establishment of some form of S&T review process or body remained. Some calls were made for prompt efforts to develop details of arrangements that could be adopted.

Codes of conduct – Many references were made to the Tianjin Biosecurity Guidelines for Codes of Conduct for Scientists with broad support being expressed.

Article VII – Many statements raised points about making Article VII responses effective in the event they were required to respond to humanitarian consequences following a breach of the Convention. Support was expressed for capacity building efforts, for the proposed Article VII database and for guidelines for requesting assistance.

National and group actions and events – The ASEAN statement referred to recent regional capacity building workshops. The Dominican Republic spoke of a national workshop that brought 23 institutions together in relation to the BWC. Canada spoke of the Signature Initiative within the Global Partnership to enhance BWC implementation across Africa. The European Union spoke of its investment in CBRN-related actions, notably the most recent Council Decision to support the BWC.

Review Conference administrative arrangements – The challenges of holding the Ninth BWC Review Conference in parallel with the Tenth nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference were raised by many delegations with a majority expressing a view that a delay to the BWC conference would also assist with finding a President-designate. A couple of delegations resisted calls to change the dates for the Review Conference.

There seemed to be fewer references to lessons from the pandemic than in opening statements to the recent MSP, perhaps because delegations were raising other points in the limited time. There seemed to be a higher number of references to gender issues than earlier comparable exchanges of views.

This is the second report from the Preparatory Committee for the Ninth BWC Review Conference being held 4-11 April 2022 in Geneva. These have been produced for all BWC meetings since the Sixth Review Conference by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). They are available from <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>> and <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>>. A subscription link is available on each webpage. The reports are written by Richard Guthrie, CBW Events, who is solely responsible for their contents <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.