

Tuesday 10th December 2013

The first day: opening remarks and statements

Opening of the meeting

The 2013 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) was opened on Monday morning by the Chair, Judit Körömi of Hungary, the Special Representative of the Foreign Minister for Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation. Formalities, such as the adoption of the agenda, the programme of work and the rules of procedure, and decisions on observers were proceeded with promptly.

Making her opening remarks, the Chair noted that this inter-sessional process had a different character from those which had gone before. In the earlier sets of meetings, each year would deal with a distinct topic and therefore the report from each meeting was 'self-contained'. The format of this inter-sessional process, with three standing agenda items and a biennial topic, means that time is spent considering subject areas each year on a repeating basis. This requires some arrangement to be able to link the reports of each year together in order to provide input into the Eighth BWC Review Conference to be held in 2016.

Opening statements

Statements were made during the morning session by Iran (for the non-aligned), Canada (for the 'JACKSNNZ' – [an informal grouping of Japan, Australia, Canada, Republic of Korea, Switzerland, Norway and New Zealand]), China, Russia, Indonesia, Denmark, Pakistan, USA, Thailand, Germany, Malaysia, Czech Republic, Japan, Italy, Cuba, South Africa, Algeria, Brazil and India. After lunch, and following a minute's silence in remembrance of Nelson Mandela, statements were given by Colombia, Albania, Australia, Republic of Korea, Iraq, Mexico, France, Libya, Lithuania, Argentina, Kenya, Uruguay, Ecuador, Burkina Faso (its first statement to a BWC plenary) and Madagascar. The European Union, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the UN 1540 Committee then gave statements as international organizations. The Implementation Support Unit (ISU) has indicated it will place copies of statements provided to it on its website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>.

In addition to general comments on universality, many delegates specifically welcomed Cameroon, Nauru, Guyana and Malawi which had joined the BWC this year. States Parties which had provided Working Papers for this MSP generally made reference to them. Numerous references were made to seminars, workshops or similar events held in the speakers' countries or regions. There were a number of calls for formal verification arrangements. The connection between responses to natural and deliberate disease was noted and that better knowledge of each of these led to improved countermeasures against both. The EU noted the adoption in November of its latest Council Decision on support of World Health Organization activities. There were suggestions about the format of the final report that each year should not reopen balances that had been crafted in adopting reports in earlier years.

Some delegates made reference to enhancements of national implementation measures either for the BWC itself or for wider biological safety and security matters. For example, Thailand noted the establishment of an Institutional Biosafety Committee and the Biosafety Association (Thailand). Iraq noted the activities of a new national committee for

management of biological risks. On means to evaluate implementation, Canada and Switzerland, with the Czech Republic, are working further on their Compliance Assessment pilot project. France noted it had carried out a pilot peer review exercise including participation by representatives of nine countries.

On cooperation and assistance, there were many calls for further implementation of Article X, primarily from non-aligned delegations, some of whom stressed that measures to reduce risk of misuse of transferred materials and technologies should be proportionate so that they did not hamper peaceful uses. Suggestions that improved national implementation assists peaceful transfers as the supplier has greater confidence of legitimate use remain an issue of divergence with some statements suggesting this creates additional burdens. Limited technical resources for BWC implementation means that capacity building is a productive form of assistance, it was said. A number of States Parties referred to assistance received from other States Parties, groups of States Parties (such as the EU) or from NGOs (such as VERTIC).

On science and technology issues, questions of how to find the right balance between open scientific research and preventing the acquisition of biological weapons were raised. It was noted that an additional factor which might increase potential threats was the reduced financial costs of many dual-use technologies.

On Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), while there were many comments that these were no substitute for verification, there were also many calls for enhancements, either through making CBMs easier to submit or through identifying more relevant information to be exchanged. Concerns were raised that there would be less attention on CBMs over the next two years as this was the last year of discussion on the subject in this series of meetings.

NGO statements

After the completion of general debate statements, the following non-governmental organizations addressed the meeting in an informal setting: the University of Bradford; the University of London; the International Network of Engineers and Scientists; Landau Network Centro Volta and the Bradford Disarmament Research Centre; Research Group for Biological Arms Control, Hamburg University; the Biosecurity Working Group of the Inter-Academy Panel on International Issues; VERTIC; Pax Christi International; Global Health & Security Consultants; and the Scientists Working Group on Chemical and Biological Weapons. Owing to time constraints, some of these statements had to be delivered in a shortened form. The statements are to be posted on the ISU website.

Side event

One of the innovations of this year has been that side events have been convened on themes rather than by single organizations. A lunchtime side event was convened on the theme of 'Developments in Science and Technology: Strengthening National Biological Risk Management'. Presentations were given by Brett Edwards, University of Bath, on 'Ensuring regime responsiveness to developments in science and technology'; Jonathan Forman, Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, on 'Chemical weapons disarmament in a technologically evolving world'; Alemka Markotic, Croatian Academy of Science, on 'An international roadmap for bioforensics: a Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, US National Academy of Sciences, UK Royal Society and International Union of Microbiological Societies initiative'; Dana Perkins, UN 1540 Committee expert, on 'UN Security Council resolution 1540: emerging trends, sharing of experiences, lessons learned and effective practices'; and Gerald Walther, University of Bradford, on 'The 2013 BioWeapons Monitor: launch and plans for the future'. The event was chaired by Ambassador Serhiy Komisarenko of Ukraine.

This is the second report from the Meeting of States Parties for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 9 to 13 December 2013 in Geneva. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). The reports are available via the BWPP website at <<http://www.bwpp.org>>. The author can be contacted during the Meeting of States Parties on +41 76 507 1026 or <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.