BioWeapons Prevention Project

PrepCom report 6

Wednesday 10th August 2016

The BWC Preparatory Committee: cross-cutting issues

The Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) for the Eighth Review Conference of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) continued on Tuesday morning with further NGO statements from the Biosecurity Working Group of the InterAcademy Panel on International Issues, the International Network of Engineers and Scientists, the Biotechnology Innovation Organization, Parliamentarians for Global Action, University of Massachusetts Lowell, and Stanford University. These were followed by statements under the agenda item for general exchange of views from Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. A request to attend the PrepCom as a non-signatory observer state was received from Guinea. This was approved and Guinea sat alongside Israel whose attendance on the same basis was agreed on Monday.

Cross cutting issues

The major part of the work on Tuesday was dedicated to 'cross-cutting issues', such as science and technology (S&T) developments, future programme of work, and the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU).

The format of the day was far more interactive than usual with many interventions being made in response to issues being raised on the floor rather than being from prepared statements. There were no group statements. As many delegations intervened more than once, this report only lists the first time a delegation took the floor under this agenda item. Interventions were given by Switzerland, Netherlands, USA, Algeria, UK, Russia, Iran, France, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Cuba, Georgia, Canada, Spain, Australia, Ukraine, China, India, Bahrain, Sweden, Malaysia, South Africa and Republic of Korea. Some material in this report is derived from statements made on Monday in the general exchange of views when they are relevant to the topics under consideration here.

None of the issues discussed here is likely to be subject of a stand-alone Review Conference decision, but will form part of a package put together to achieve consensus.

There was some frustration expressed that the previous work programmes (also known as inter-sessional processes or ISPs) did not lead to concrete actions. The UK noted that a return to the status quo would not be a satisfactory option. The USA suggested four questions to help frame the debate: What are we trying to achieve between Review Conferences? What exactly should we talk about? How do we go about it? What support is required? Many comments suggested that substance should come before process.

S&T developments

The focus was on S&T review arrangements, and in particular the balance between inclusiveness and representativeness on the one hand and leaner processes which would have fewer participants and require fewer resources. It was suggested that all of the S&T review proposals have some advantages and some disadvantages – the balancing of these will involve some discussion. Notably, no delegation spoke against the idea of S&T review.

Switzerland spoke to its paper (WP.16) which collates areas of convergence and divergence on the various proposals for S&T review. This paper has been widely commended by other delegations as helping to guide the discussion on possible options. Russia suggested that those delegations which had submitted papers on S&T review should consult together to see if they could come up with a joint proposal. India noted that countries that did not submit papers on this subject might still have an interest. The Chair, Ambassador Molnár, acknowledged that any such consultations should be inclusive.

There was some discussion of codes of conduct, much of which was focused on the proposal by China at the 2015 Meeting of States Parties (BWC/MSP/2015/WP.9)

Future programme of work

The points raised regarding possibilities for structures of any new ISP are best described in a series of questions. Would there be benefits in replacing the annual Meeting of Experts with working groups on specific subjects? Would such a change make the process expert-led? Would an expert-led process be more flexible in being able to respond to changing contexts such as S&T developments? Would an expert-led process reduce the role of governments? Would this lead to reduced level of engagement by governments without resources to fully engage in such working groups? A variety of perspectives were offered, which should stimulate further debate on the form any such work programme could take.

Much discussion focused on whether any ISP arrangements could take decisions. Different forms of decision suggested included decisions on effective actions to be taken by governments or simple changes to the agenda topics during the ISP. Some raised questions of whether a Review Conference should be the only body to take decisions. Concerns were raised as to whether ISP decisions might be selectively taken on particular issues rather than on a comprehensive package of measures across the Convention. Others noted that decisions might be needed to respond to contextual events such as S&T developments or lessons to be learned from new disease outbreaks. South Africa introduced WP.21 on functional structures which is an effort to codify elements of past practice. India noted that Review Conference decisions are binding commitments on States Parties.

Russia promoted its proposal put forward with Armenia, Belarus and China at the 2015 MSP (BWC/MSP/2015/WP.4) for a negotiating body in the form of an open-ended working group that could deal with a range of issues within the remit of the BWC but not verification. From the Russian perspective, this would be expected to be more productive than the existing ISP format.

Implementation Support Unit

Interventions illustrated that the work of the ISU has been highly regarded. As with balances between subject matter for any future work programme, some delegations indicated that the ISU mandate needs to be balanced across the various parts of the Convention. Some proposals were made to expand the ISU and many delegations noted that staffing would need to match the tasks detailed within any new mandate. Questions were raised over the geographical distribution of staff which has been predominantly Western.

Side event

There was a lunchtime side event convened by Russia under the title of 'Establishing mobile biomedical units under the BWC: a multipurpose capability to strengthen collective security under the Convention and pursue its humanitarian mandate' with Vyacheslav Smolenskiy (Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Well-Being [Rospotrebnadzor]) and Vladimir Ladanov (Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

This is the third report from the August meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the Eighth BWC Review Conference which is a continuation of the PrepCom session in April. 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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