

CWC Review Conference Report

The third day of the Conference: the General Debate concludes

Friday, the third day of the Fourth five-yearly Review Conference (RC-4) of the of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), marked the end of the first of two weeks of back-to-back meetings in The Hague. Plenary activities continued on Friday with the agenda item known as the General Debate which took the whole day of the Conference proceedings.

National statements were delivered by Côte d'Ivoire, Mexico, Myanmar, Colombia, Ghana, Nigeria, Nepal, Tunisia, Thailand, South Africa, Belgium, Burkina Faso, India, Singapore, Fiji, Cameroon, Venezuela, Kuwait, Sudan, Kazakhstan and Bulgaria. There then followed right of reply statements from Iran, Syria and Russia in which each used terms such as 'baseless' and 'categorically reject' in denying allegations that had been made by the United States in its earlier statement. These were followed by statements from: Israel as a signatory state; the International Committee of the Red Cross as an international organization; the OPCW's Advisory Board on Education and Outreach; and the International Council of Chemical Associations (ICCA) and the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry (IUPAC) as industrial and scientific bodies. The final block of statements were from 24 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and these were followed by the exercise of a right of reply by Palestine in response to the statement by Israel. The last of the NGOs statements and the Palestinian statement were made after interpretation had finished, with the session ending at 19.04. A number of delegates gave an abridged oral version of their statements with the full version being circulated in writing.

For those not experienced with Review Conferences, it may seem odd as to how repetitive many of the statements are. The obvious purpose of statements is to present ideas to the Review Conference and highlight priorities. There is further purpose that is not so obvious which relates to the process within governments that puts them together – within most country's administrative arrangements, a high-level statement such as in the general debate of a Review Conference cannot be given until all relevant departments have agreed to it. This means that the departments are interacting on the subject and so this process makes officials across governments aware of CWC issues.

Some further General Debate themes

Following on from the themes examined in the last daily report, some further themes are examined here. This reporting takes details from statements made on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. The themes reported here and in earlier daily reports are not comprehensive as there have been some 18 hours of general debate at this Review Conference.

Attribution and the June decision – As might be expected, the issues around attribution have been where some of the most divergent views have been expressed. Supporters of the June attribution decision have expressed views that the new attribution process falls within the scope of the CWC while opponents of the June decision have expressed views that if the OPCW were to be given an attribution role, there should have been a conference to amend the CWC itself, as is allowed for under Article XV of the Convention as, from this perspective, attribution is beyond the scope of the CWC as it stands. For example, India suggested that it was essential that 'all investigations of alleged use of chemical weapons are impartial, objective and conducted strictly in accordance with

the Convention, utilizing all its provisions.’ Russia described the proposed attribution process as ‘politically motivated’ and Malaysia suggested the process to get the attribution decision was a ‘rushed job’. Others declared support for attribution and some announced voluntary financial contributions to OPCW attribution efforts, such as Denmark and the UK. The UK suggested ‘supporting OPCW attribution is not about choosing sides in big power politics, it is about restoring the global taboo against chemical weapons’.

Scientific and technological developments – As with earlier Review Conferences, there was recognition of the need for keeping the efforts to prevent acquisition and use of chemical weapons to take into account scientific and technological developments. Many references were made to plans to upgrade and add to the OPCW Laboratory to turn it into a ‘Centre for Chemistry and Technology’. As well as verbal support for this project, a number of delegations promised voluntary financial assistance; these included Belgium, France and the Republic of Korea.

Central nervous system-acting chemicals – There has been an ongoing effort by some states to consider the implications of aerosolized CNS-acting chemicals that some governments have been exploring for possible use for ‘law enforcement’ purposes. Australia and Switzerland have been promoting a discussion on the subject and asking other governments to sign up to a paper which now appears to have over 40 co-sponsors. An additional co-sponsor announced this week is Sweden. A typical statement of position of the co-sponsors of the paper is that of New Zealand which stated ‘We will only employ chemical agents which conform to the definition of riot control agents contained within the CWC, and which have been endorsed as such by the OPCW’s Scientific Advisory Board.’

Schedule amendment proposal – A number of delegations referred to a joint suggestion by Canada, the Netherlands and the United States to amend the schedules of chemicals in the CWC. This would add the family of chemicals which includes the toxic substance to which the Skripals were exposed. This technical proposal has been caught up in the some of the controversy around the Salisbury poisonings. [Note: in discussions this author had with relevant officials before the Review Conference it had seemed that the amendment proposal was to be made public with a confidential document circulated in parallel amongst states parties. There does seem to be two documents but it seems neither will be made public at this stage. It has been suggested in corridor discussions that both documents are now judged to contain proliferation-sensitive information.]

Chemical weapons destruction and past disposal – The remaining US declared chemical weapons stocks awaiting destruction were highlighted a number of times. China and Japan both spoke of developments in destruction of chemical weapons abandoned in the territory of the latter by the former, although each described progress in quite different terms. The risks from sea-dumped chemical munitions, that were disposed of before the CWC was agreed, were raised by Lithuania and Poland.

Management activities – A number of issues relating to the management of the OPCW Technical Secretariat were raised. The issue of staff tenure (a policy adopted some years ago that limits employment within the OPCW for most staff to 7 years) was raised many times, especially regarding the balance between ensuring reasonable turnover of staff while at the same time fulfilling the need to retain acquired expertise that can be highly specialized. A recent independent review of staffing was referred to a number of times. The call to ensure fair geographic representation of staff was prominent as has been in previous Review Conferences. Gender issues had a much higher profile at this Review Conference than at earlier ones; Canada, in an aside from the prepared speech, noted that of the personnel on the stage during the Conference proceedings, 1 was a woman, while 11 were men and commented ‘we can do better’.

This is the sixth report from the Fourth Review Conference of the Chemical Weapons Convention being held in The Hague 21-30 November 2018, preceded by the 23rd Session of the Conference of States Parties. These reports are prepared for the CWC Coalition, a global network of non-governmental groups with CWC interests, and are available at <<<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/cwc-rep.html>>>. The author, Richard Guthrie of CBW Events, can be contacted via <<richard@cbw-events.org.uk>>.