

Monday 29th August 2010

The Final Day: Wrapping up the meeting

The 2010 Meeting of Experts (MX) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC/BWC) concluded its proceedings on Friday with Ambassador Pedro Oyarce of Chile in the Chair. Again, there was an early start with a pre-meeting side event.

The report of the meeting, which essentially details the procedural aspects, was adopted, together with the draft compilation of suggestions made during the meeting that would be appended to it. As the compilation is produced in the name of the Chair, it did not need to be gone through on a line-by-line basis by the meeting. Indeed, States Parties were encouraged to go through the compilation over the weekend and inform the Implementation Support Unit if they felt there were any suggestions that had been missed.

Substantive presentations on Thursday's topics were given by the European Union (as an international organization), Mexico, Romania and the UK in a short spillover session.

Universalization

Just before the adoption of the report from the MX, the Chairman gave a verbal report on progress towards universalization of the Convention. There was some regret that no countries had joined the BWC since the 2008 Meeting of States Parties (MSP). The accession of the Cook Islands announced on the last day of that meeting had brought the total of States Parties to 163, up from 155 at the time of the 2006 Review Conference decision on 'Promotion of Universalization'. However, Ambassador Oyarce noted that both Cameroon and Malawi had indicated that they had completed their internal procedures required for accession. Other states, such as Angola and Tanzania had started internal procedures and there were 'positive signs' from Côte d'Ivoire. A formal report on universalization will be given at the MSP in December.

Closing remarks and statements

In his closing remarks, Ambassador Oyarce noted that 150 of the 450 delegates present at the meeting had flown in from their countries – a high proportion for a meeting like this. He described this as showing commitment. Looking toward the 2011 Review Conference, he noted a need to discuss issues with 'no preconceived ideas' and a need to strengthen the ISU as part of enhancing the effectiveness of the Convention. As traditional, a number of delegations on behalf of the regional groupings gave brief closing statements.

Side event

There was one side event on Friday, held in the morning before the start of the working session, by Anupa Gupte, an independent researcher, on 'International Cooperation Mechanisms for Scientific, Technical and Technological matters of BWC Implementation'.

Reflections

A conscious effort is taken in writing these daily summaries to report the facts and not give opinion. However, there are many times that the question is raised – ‘so what do you think about what happened?’ While the role of a commentator should be to try to report what is happening in an impartial manner, there are times that this style of reporting does not convey some of the atmosphere of meetings. The following are some personal reflections that do not necessarily represent anyone’s views other than the author’s own.

The 2010 meetings are the last of the current inter-sessional process established by the 2006 Review Conference. This naturally leads to thoughts about what should happen in the Seventh Review Conference in 2011. The announcement of the nomination by the Western Group of Ambassador Paul van den IJssel (Netherlands) as President for the Conference creates a natural focal point for early informal discussions that are valuable contributors to success of a review. A reason for the success of 2006 was the early announcement of Ambassador Masood Khan (Pakistan) as President of that conference.

This was the third MX to have been completely open, following the precedents of 2008 and 2009, with none of the sessions held behind closed doors. Many of the sessions were also available on the web. While the intention of the ISU had been to webcast as much as possible, some technical complications had made it difficult to get every session online.

The inter-sessional process has had a rather limited remit. Observing international diplomacy for too many years can make even the most optimistic commentator cynical about what may be achieved in inter-governmental meetings. However, the 2010 Meeting of Experts was undoubtably a success within the terms of this remit, giving plenty to build upon at the Meeting of States Parties in December. This naturally leads to thoughts about how much more could have been done had the remit been more flexible.

One innovation this year was the holding of a parallel workshop on confidence-building measures (CBMs) organized under the EU Joint Action in support of the BWC. The workshop, aimed at assisting countries in understanding the processes involved in CBM submission, was thus not strictly part of the MX, not least because the remit from 2006 would not allow for it. There are advantages and disadvantages in holding a parallel event such as this. Clearly delegates cannot be in two places at once, but the target audience for the workshop would not be likely to travel to Geneva for a separate event nor, perhaps, to stay in Geneva for an extra day. Therefore, to attract the maximum attention from the target audience, there were distinct advantages to hold it during the week of the MX. Efforts were taken to minimize the effects on the MX by scheduling the parallel event in such a way as to reduce this impact. With the number of CBM returns at 70 for this year so far – the highest number of returns submitted in any single year – it is possible that some of the participants in the workshop will be able to submit their first returns before the end of the year.

The Geneva Protocol became the focus of more attention than in recent years as a number of delegations connected the UN Secretary-General’s mechanism to investigate alleged use of biological weapons specifically to breaches of the Protocol. While the BWC has gained eight States Parties since the end of 2006, three countries have become full parties to the Protocol during the same period. El Salvador, which had signed the Protocol in 1925, deposited its instrument of ratification in 2008. Slovenia and Costa Rica acceded in 2008 and 2009 respectively. It may be a pertinent time to consider what efforts could be made to further increase the membership and to promote the withdrawal of remaining reservations.

This is the sixth and final report from the Meeting of Experts for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 23 to 27 August 2010 in Geneva. The reports are designed to help people who are not in Geneva to follow the proceedings. Copies are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>>.

The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). Financial assistance for this project has been provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Sweden.

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