

CWC Review Conference Report

The opening of the Review Conference and the start of the general debate

The Fifth five-yearly Review Conference for the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) was opened on Monday morning by Ambassador Vusimuzi Madonsela (South Africa) in his role as the current Chair of the regular session of the Conference of the States Parties (CSP). Ambassador Madonsela presided over the appointment of the Chair/President of the Review Conference itself and Ambassador Henk Cor van der Kwast (Netherlands) was duly elected by acclamation.

In brief opening remarks on taking up his new role, Ambassador van der Kwast expressed aspirations for achieving consensus and for the primary aim of the CWC – the achievement of a world free of chemical weapons.

The opening formalities and procedural decisions at the start of a Review Conference are usually brief and somewhat routine. Key decisions include those on attendance by those that are not states parties. The decisions on attendance by non-signatory states, international bodies and representatives of industry for this Review Conference were adopted without discussion. When the draft decision on attendance by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) was introduced a number of delegations took the floor. The first was Türkiye which suggested there had been an error in process as it had objected to the attendance of one NGO. Germany made a statement on behalf of 52 states parties from across the regional groups which argued that NGOs made important contributions toward a chemical-weapon-free world and that NGO attendance guidelines agreed at the Third Review Conference (2013) were being undermined by a small number of states parties. Russia suggested that there were NGOs that do not contribute to the work under the Convention but cause it harm. Ireland listed the countries in support of the cross-regional statement given by Germany. Iran suggested that any process for selecting which NGOs should be granted attendance had to be in accordance with the rules of procedure. A number of these interventions indicated an interest in revisiting the process for accrediting non-governmental representatives although from different perspectives. Following this discussion, the decision on NGO attendance was adopted by consensus.

Each of the five regional groups can nominate two Vice-Chairs for the Review Conference and four of these groups produced the relevant nominations. The fifth, the Eastern European Group (EEG), was unable to conclude these procedures within the group and had three nominations still in play – Lithuania, North Macedonia and Russia. Each of these candidate countries was given the floor. Lithuania and North Macedonia noted that 18 of the 23 EEG members had been in favour of their nominations and that in the current circumstances the majority of EEG members did not wish to be represented by Russia. Russia indicated that it had put its candidacy forward first and that the EEG was paralysed as a group as so many were members of the EU or NATO. The rules of procedure allow for a secret ballot of all states parties to resolve such situations and such a ballot was held at the end of the day's proceedings with the result expected to be announced during Tuesday.

Opening statements

The OPCW Director-General, Ambassador Fernando Arias, and the United Nations High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, each gave opening statements in person to the Review Conference while UN Secretary-General António Guterres sent a video message.

The Director-General noted that the contemporary global security context is ‘notably different’ from that at the entry into force of the Convention in 1997. He described the ban against the use of chemical weapons embodied in the Convention as ‘permanent and incontestable’ and noted that the CWC has nearly universal membership. He informed the Conference that, as of 30 April, 99.82 per cent of all declared chemical weapons had been destroyed with the remainder due to be completed in the coming months. He noted that the Declaration Assessment Team (DAT) was still working to resolve issues in relation to Syria and said that the Syrian authorities were still refusing a visa for the DAT lead technical expert. He highlighted that three reports relating to five cases had been published by the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) and that each had concluded that there were ‘reasonable grounds’ to believe government forces had used chemical weapons in Syria. He welcomed the inauguration of the new ChemTech Centre highlighting that it would significantly enhance the operational and capacity-building capabilities of the OPCW, noting with thanks the financial contributions from 57 countries, the EU, and from other donors.

The High Representative summarized chemical weapons in the following terms: ‘From Flanders Fields to the Iran-Iraq war and, more recently, the streets of Syria, these repugnant weapons have caused nothing but pain and misery’. She implored states parties to cooperate to restore the norm against the use of chemical weapons, show leadership in upholding the ‘hard-won gains’ of the CWC, and demonstrate that impunity in the use of the chemical weapons will not be tolerated.

The Secretary-General declared: ‘In the name of the victims of these attacks — and as a deterrent to future chemical warfare — those responsible for any use must be identified and held accountable for their crimes’. He expressed his ‘full support for the integrity, professionalism, impartiality, objectivity, and independence’ of the OPCW Technical Secretariat.

The Review Conference also heard from the Chair of the Executive Council, Ambassador Lucian Fătu (Romania), reporting on that body’s preparations for the Review Conference and from the Chair of the ‘Open-Ended Working Group for the Preparation of the Fifth Review Conference’ (OEWG-RC), Ambassador Lauri Kuusing (Estonia), reporting on the preparations by the Working Group. Both of these reports will be issued as statements alongside other statements and documents from the Conference via the OPCW website at <http://www.opcw.org>.

The start of the general debate

The general debate offers the chance for delegations to make statements to outline their positions on any aspect of the Convention or activities within it. As with previous practice, this was started with ‘high-level statements’ (essentially those made by visiting dignitaries above the rank of ambassador) followed by statements on behalf of groups of states and then national statements. Many statements had already been submitted in writing and posted to the OPCW website. In such cases, delegations were encouraged to provide highlights from their statements rather than read them in full. High-level statements were delivered by Iraq, Iran, Russia, Venezuela, Germany, the UK, the USA and Italy. Group statements were given by the African Group (delivered by Ghana), the Members of the Non-Aligned Movement that are States Parties to the CWC and China (delivered by Azerbaijan), the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States (GRULAC, delivered by Chile) and the EU (delivered from the nameplate of Sweden as the current holder of the rotating EU Presidency). National statements were delivered by China, Norway, Liechtenstein, Brazil, Cuba, India, Japan, Canada, Australia, Austria, Guatemala, Ukraine, Mexico, Costa Rica, Spain, Pakistan, State of Palestine and Poland. With the general debate continuing into Tuesday, it is perhaps premature to come to any immediate conclusions relating to any predominant themes.

This is the second report from the Fifth Review Conference for the Chemical Weapons Convention being held in The Hague from 15 to 19 May 2023. These reports are written by Richard Guthrie of CBW Events who is solely responsible for their contents. The reports are available via <http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/cwc-rep.html> which includes a subscription link to receive the reports via email. The author can be contacted via richard@cbw-events.org.uk.