

Friday 13th December 2024

Approaching the endgame, but an abrupt halt to consultations

Thursday, the penultimate day of the Fifth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) returned, as scheduled, to the topic of ‘Overall consideration of all topics as contained in paragraphs 8, 18 and 19’. At the end of the afternoon plenary a draft of the procedural report of the WG was circulated.

Proceedings on the Chair’s proposal

The Chair’s proposal focuses on the adoption of the two proposed mechanisms – one on international cooperation and assistance that relates to implementation of Article X (the ICA mechanism) and one providing advice from the review of scientific and technological developments of relevance to the Convention (the S&T mechanism) – at a possible Special Conference. The last full version of the proposal was provided to delegates on Wednesday. In place of a plenary on Thursday morning there were consultations in a small group setting. During a brief plenary on Thursday afternoon texts for three replacement paragraphs were circulated. There are further paragraphs from the Wednesday draft under discussion in the informal consultations which have been held behind closed doors.

Consultations were expected to continue late into Thursday night, but were halted abruptly following a position taken by one delegation, Russia. As it was a meeting behind closed doors and after hours, there are details that remain sketchy at the time of writing. The intervention that halted the consultations was in relation to whether paragraph 16 of the Decisions and Recommendations part of the Final Document of the Ninth BWC Review Conference (2022) applies to paragraphs 18 and 19 on setting up the two mechanisms. A plenary was already scheduled for Friday morning for a report back from the consultations and this is likely to make things clearer.

Atmosphere of the WG before the abrupt ending of the consultations

The atmosphere was typical of the last days of a BWC meeting, with some progress towards consensus in the various consultations but no certainty it could be achieved. Indeed, history shows that a sense that it may be challenging to achieve consensus focuses minds and puts pressure on delegations and their capitals to think through what points they may be prepared to concede to gain the advances they are most in favour of.

As has been mentioned many times in BWC meetings, concluding a consensus document is not about finding a text that everyone is delighted with; it is about finding a text that everyone can live with. As one delegate once put it, there should be an equal sense of achievement and of disappointment across all participants.

These reports have been produced by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) for all BWC meetings with NGO registration since the Sixth Review Conference (2006). They are available from <https://www.bwpp.org/reports.html> and <https://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>. A subscription link is available on each webpage. The reports are written by Richard Guthrie, CBW Events, who is solely responsible for their contents <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.