

Thursday 28th August 2025

The closure of the Sixth Session and some reflections

The Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) adopted its procedural report on Friday 22 August and was then brought to a close.

Before discussion of the report, the Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), introduced a graphic illustrating the reporting powers of the mechanism to provide advice on scientific and technological (S&T) developments. This, like the proposal the day before, was based on the comparable elements of the Scientific Advisory Board under the Chemical Weapons Convention. There followed some discussion of the meaning of ‘consensus’ in the reporting of the mechanism but with no firm conclusion.

Adoption of the procedural report

The Chair had introduced a draft of the report earlier in the week, based on the texts of similar reports from earlier sessions. The only new element was paragraph 12 which referred to the rolling text circulated by the Chair. [*Note: the paper from the Chair during WG5 on a draft decision for the two mechanisms was of a similar status but as that session didn’t even attempt to adopt a procedural report after the disruption of the evening of the penultimate day there had not been discussion on language to reflect it.*] Various amendments to the paragraph were put forward which were then discussed informally over the lunch break to produce a consensus paragraph. After that, the report was adopted at 15.14 with only some minor amendments about attendance.

The report, and other documents from the Sixth Session have been posted by the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) to the official web page of the session which can be found at <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/75240/>

Reflections

A conscious effort is taken in writing these summaries to report as objectively as possible. However, there are times that this style of reporting does not convey some of the atmosphere of meetings or implications of proceedings. The following are some personal reflections that do not necessarily represent anyone’s views other than the author’s own.

The two-week session started with a very crowded building as there were many delegates to the negotiations on a plastics treaty which came to an unsuccessful conclusion on the Thursday of the first week. Many dejected faces were seen on the Friday morning.

Perhaps the question asked of this author most often during WG6 was: ‘what are the prospects of achieving success?’ Notwithstanding that there might be some variation in what might be considered a success, the prospects would seem to be positive in that the vast majority of delegations have a broadly similar view of what should happen next. Yet there are a couple of delegations that have previously blocked consensus in the BWC that have not indicated they would join consensus on key points discussed by the WG.

On the question of success, one way of looking at this would be to describe these meetings as the ‘talking phase’ of the WG to hopefully be followed by what might be called the ‘first phase of action’ that would be agreed at Tenth Review Conference

scheduled for 2027. This would then produce results to be considered at the Eleventh Review Conference five years later from which a second phase of action would result which hopefully would include substantive negotiations. This first phase would include the two mechanisms and the open-ended working group (OEWG) on compliance and verification. But what else might the decision need?

During WG6, Iran reiterated its view that all elements of the WG mandate should be dealt with equally. What does equal treatment mean in this context? There has been no suggestion that the confidence building and transparency topic, for example, needs its own OEWG and so it is obvious that there will be some variation in emphasis on the seven WG topics deriving from paragraph 8 of part II of the Ninth Review Conference final document. While the two mechanisms stand apart in some ways from their related paragraph 8 topics their adoption may be seen as promoting those topics. It would seem pragmatic to ensure the other topics – confidence building and transparency; national implementation; assistance, response and preparedness under Article VII; and organizational, institutional and financial arrangements – have something within any package put forward. Iran used consensus-blocking tactics to considerably weaken provisions in both the Eighth and Ninth Review Conferences.

The other country that has blocked consensus in recent years is Russia. Close to the end of WG5 the proposal for a Special Conference to adopt the two mechanisms was brought to a sudden halt by that delegation expressing an interpretation of the WG mandate which was not shared by the vast majority of states parties. Iran's position has long been a substantive one. Russia's position came across as using procedural objections to prevent substantive discussion. The geopolitical circumstances make interpreting the internal politics of both countries more challenging than usual which, in turn, makes it harder for outsiders to understand what aspects of issues might appeal to them and so help build consensus. From the information available to this author, it seems there is no clear indication of what the internal desires of either country are in relation to the BWC. Nevertheless, it would be an odd situation if delegations which in the past would not agree to various activities because verification issues were not on the agenda would block things now that there is a real chance to move forward on compliance and verification issues.

There were some comments in the corridors that the work of the OEWG was only roughly sketched out. Yet it would be remarkable if only a couple of days discussion in WG6 would be able to scope out a proposed process that is to run for 20 working days a year (and so 80 working days between Review Conferences).

A particular characteristic of WG6 has been the role of the Chair. Ambassador Meyer has been consistently firm with delegates yet in some ways has been quite unpredictable. Sometimes when he speaks it has been hard to tell whether he has had a careful thought or has acted on the spur of the moment. By being difficult to second-guess, the Chair has probably increased his influence over the discussions.

WG6 was probably the last chance for a decision on convening of a Special Conference as any later decision would have the Special Conference so close to the Tenth Review Conference to provide little, if any, advantage. Having said that, in theory a Special Conference decision could include a delay for the Tenth Review Conference.

Multilateral processes can make progress which is then hampered by lack of national preparations. National policy processes vary, but delegations need to forewarn their finance ministries that if the WG is successful there will be increases in assessed contributions to support the BWC. Estimates indicate that the first phase of action to strengthen the BWC would involve costs that are in the range of 2 to 3 times the current budget. The rational argument is in favour of strengthening the Convention, but time may be needed to persuade those not directly involved with the BWC that this should be treated outside of the 'zero-growth' budgeting that many governments have for international arrangements. The time to start doing this would appear to be now. As the Philippines remarked during WG6: 'budget allocation is the highest form of policy implementation'.

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.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>. A subscription link is available on the webpage. The reports are written by Richard Guthrie, CBW Events, who is solely responsible for their contents <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.