

Tuesday 9th December 2025

The opening day of the Seventh Session of the BWC Working Group

The Seventh Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) opened on Monday morning with Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil) in the Chair.

The day began with a video message from UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu, followed by opening remarks from the Chair before the start of a read-through of the draft decision. The few opening formalities required, such as decisions on attendance of observers, were brief.

WG7 is being held in the Tempus building – a temporary facility constructed to provide accommodation while other buildings are being refurbished across the UN estate.

The message from the High Representative

The High Representative indicated that, over the 50 years since its entry into force, the BWC has ‘codified a strong and long-standing rule that the use of biological weapons is repugnant to the conscience of humanity’. Referring to the rapid advances in science and technology she highlighted that ‘these advances bring with them opportunities for human health and agriculture’ yet at the same time ‘they also pose serious security challenges because of their dual use potential’ and noted that existing global measures, including the BWC, ‘remain under-resourced and ill-equipped to respond to these new threats’. She called the need to strengthen the BWC ‘not only necessary but an urgent imperative’.

She described the opportunity to strengthen the BWC this year as ‘unique’ and noted that reaching agreement at WG7 would ensure that decisions could be implemented without delay. She provided a warning of the consequences if this were not possible: ‘failure to agree now would likely delay implementation of the recommendations until 2028 at the earliest’. Her concluding words were a call to action: ‘Let us demonstrate that even in times of geopolitical challenges, states parties can cooperate and meaningful progress can be achieved. This spirit of cooperation guided the Convention’s adoption more than 50 years ago and it must guide us again today’.

Opening remarks by the Chair

The Chair started by repeating his belief that it is ‘high time’ to take action and agree to a final report making ‘strong and concrete recommendations’ to ‘strengthen and institutionalize the Convention in all its aspects’. He urged delegates to rise to the challenge of strengthening a Convention ‘whose purpose is to ensure that weapons based on disease never see the light of the day, whether conceived with old tools or with new ones’. Noting ‘the very nature of what is technologically conceivable as a biological weapon has been transformed by the biotechnological advances in the 21st century’, he highlighted that the budget for the BWC ‘still mirrors a 20th century view of biological warfare’. Perhaps anticipating future challenging discussions on finances, he suggested that the percentage increases over the current BWC budget for activities to strengthen the Convention might ‘appear striking’ if viewed in isolation, yet this would be ‘an illusion if our metric is cost effectiveness’. He emphasised how small the ‘institutional footprint’ would still be compared with what states have built in the nuclear and chemical regimes.

The start of the paragraph-by-paragraph review

In managing the work of WG7, the Chair explicitly inhibited any overarching or general statement as a means of forcing focus on the text within the draft decision. The run-through was essentially a ‘first reading’ in which some paragraphs could be identified as being agreed upon and others ‘parked’ for the time being where agreement could not be found promptly. The underlying principle that ‘nothing is agreed until everything is agreed’ remained. As with any similar negotiation the devil is in the detail and how delegations position themselves on any particular issue can depend on their perceptions of how the overall package of measures matches their desires and expectations.

Not all proposals put forward during the work of the WG had been reflected in the draft decision document as part of the effort to make it an overall package acceptable to delegations; this led to a tendency of proposers to repeat their ideas although these repetitions did not often gain traction.

The main body of the draft decision was read through with little controversy as most of the paragraphs within it are essentially factual or procedural; repeating the WG mandate or indicating the dates of sessions and who were the office holders, for example. The substantive issues are contained in the Annexes. The first two sections of Annex I – the recommended measures on international cooperation and assistance (ICA) under Article X, and those on scientific and technological (S&T) developments relevant to the Convention – were read through during Monday.

[*Erratum* – the report in this series published yesterday suggested the draft decision document had two annexes when it has three. The first of these contains recommendations in relation to the seven paragraph 8 topics; the second deals with the ICA mechanism; and the third deals with the S&T mechanism. The error was due to rapid drafting and sloppy editing on the part of the author – apologies, *mea culpa!*]

Some of the divergences between positions expressed during the day arose from long-held policy differences – such as the role of sanctions – on which positions have been previously elaborated very clearly and common ground is going to be challenging to find. However, this is familiar territory for diplomats and such challenges have been overcome in other forums.

In addition to these, there are more subtle divergences which stem from differences in understandings of the role of governments within states. There is a diverse range of national contexts within BWC states parties while only one text is agreed within the BWC to apply to all of them. Areas where some of these more subtle divergences were highlighted included discussions on issues such as education and awareness raising in which the varying perceptions of the roles of governments in relation to industry or academia, for example, were reflected in the choices of terminology being proposed. Another example related to whether activities that the WG would ‘encourage’ states parties to carry out should be expressly described as ‘voluntary’. One perspective put forward by western European delegations was that if something was ‘encouraged’ it was not an obligation and including the term ‘voluntary’ was not needed (and might actually weaken such encouragement). A different perspective, exemplified by Russia, was that there needed to be a clear distinction between those things that were obligatory and those that were voluntary in a text that was ultimately intended to form part of a Review Conference or Special Conference decision.

The day also provided reminders that national political changes impact upon positions expressed in the BWC. For example, the United States, an advocate for the endorsement of the Tianjin Biosecurity Guidelines for Codes of Conduct for Scientists at the Ninth BWC Review Conference (2022), indicated it could not agree to a paragraph in the draft WG decision that endorsed those same guidelines without mentioning any others.

Overall, the tone of discussion in the plenary was positive, notwithstanding the divergences noted above.

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> where a subscription link is available. The reports are written by Richard Guthrie, CBW Events, who is solely responsible for their contents <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.