

Wednesday 10th December 2025

Slow reading - the second day of the BWC Working Group Seventh Session

The Seventh Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) continued on Tuesday with a read-through of further parts of the draft report. This filled all of the available daytime plenary time and the Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), invited delegates to an evening plenary in a side room (Salle IX) that was convened for two-and-a-half hours, breaking at 9pm. The Chair noted he had planned to go until 11pm but tiredness and IT challenges led to an early adjournment.

Progress was slower than on Monday, reflecting that there was a higher proportion of substantive paragraphs to be discussed. At the current rate, it will be challenging to complete the work of the WG by the close of Friday. Indeed, if the annexes on the mechanisms need to be read paragraph-by-paragraph, not even the first read-through will be completed by Friday even if there are more evening meetings. There was a point during the afternoon when the pace picked up for a while during which it was possible to read through a paragraph, collect comments from the floor, and then have a pause for a few minutes to allow those on the podium to have a brief consultation with concerned delegates to allow a revised version to be put to the room. Nevertheless, at the end of proceedings on Tuesday, the first read-through was on page 8 of the Chair's 29-page draft of which the first 3 pages had been factual or procedural and so dealt with relatively quickly on Monday. Many substantive paragraphs remained 'parked' to be revisited later to resolve some aspect of them.

The level of exasperation experienced the Chair visibly rose through Tuesday. For example: 'I was an optimist but now becoming a pessimistic person'. Another example was when some delegates wanted to retain language that a body to be set up 'should complete its work as soon as possible' he remarked 'delegations defend this but behave in the opposite way here'; and later added that if the work of the WG did not finish on Friday, the sentence would be deleted 'as a matter of honour!' More 'Meyer-isms' are expected as the week progresses.

Some overarching points

Perhaps the strongest impression gained from observing the first read-through of the draft report thus far is there doesn't seem to be a clear convergence of views of what the document is for. Is it a document to reflect the policy situation or is it to decide a future course of action for the BWC? If it is the former, what does it bring to the table that is different from earlier inter-sessional programmes of work? If it is the latter, does the discussion need to be more focused on decision points?

There were some concerns raised about the selection of paragraphs that remained in the document after it had been trimmed down from the version circulated to delegations in October in an effort to make it a more streamlined and workable document. Delegates keen on text that had been dropped during this process were clearly frustrated. The Chair indicated that he had consulted with the Friends of the Chair (FoC) in the revising the October draft. This prompted many of the FoCs to catch each other's eyes, suggesting that perhaps this process could have been more transparent.

There were a number of points raised about where in the draft final report certain elements should be included. Primarily these were about movements of texts within individual sections. A particular point was raised about whether some aspects of financial implications of proposing new activities to be carried out under the auspices of the BWC should be in the section proposing the activities or in the section on ‘organizational, institutional and financial arrangements’.

There were a number of moments where a long time was spent tweaking a paragraph here or there to make it ideal. However, the lack of time may well end up making the ideal the enemy of the good.

During the day there was much discussion about which modal verbs to use in which parts of the text. Modal verbs are auxiliary verbs that express an aspect of action of another verb. Examples include to express a possibility (‘can’), a permission (‘may’), an obligation (‘must’), or an expectation (‘should’).

Some thematic points

It is too early to come to conclusions on many of the substantive matters as this is, so far only a first read-through, but there are some points worth noting from the sections dealing with the WG topics. Some of the issues around international cooperation and assistance (ICA) under Article X were raised on Monday and were covered in the previous report.

Scientific and technological (S&T) developments relevant to the BWC – WG7 returned to S&T issues on Tuesday morning. During discussion on S&T convergences, Iran expressed the view that any new biological S&T developments that contained a significant chemical aspect should be considered outside of the realm of the BWC as this would be in the realm of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). [Note: if this logic were to be also applied from the chemical side, any convergent S&T with significant aspects in both of the biological and chemical fields would be considered outside the remit of each of the Conventions. This would create a loophole so large as to completely undermine any efforts for a biological-weapon-free and chemical-weapon-free world.]

Confidence-building and transparency – During discussions it was announced that an additional return under the BWC Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) arrangements had been received on Tuesday, bringing the total for 2025 to 117 thus far. This is the sixth year in a row in which a record number of returns has been received. It was noted that the current draft adds additional tasks for the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) without allocating additional funds. It was highlighted that the December draft had no paragraphs relating to transparency and so proposals were made to reinsert some relevant text.

Compliance and verification – There had been some questions about the significance of the term ‘open-ended working group’ (OEWG) and so the ‘open-ended’ part had been removed from the latest draft. This was reinstated during discussion. OEWG can be a confusing term of art as an end-point for an OEWG can be set when it is established. There was discussion on when the proposed OEWG on compliance and verification might be established and what forms of participation there might be from outside experts. There was a suggestion that the text on the OEWG should be explicit that the OEWG should focus on ‘negative obligations’ under the BWC – i.e., obligations to not do something, such as acquire biological weapons – but this prompted some concerns as there did not seem to be a common understanding in the room of which obligations would fall in this category. Much of the discussion did not take into account that there would be the two mechanisms adopted at the same time, although there were a couple of exceptions. Cuba noted that if there were any lists of pathogens to be discussed they would logically be reviewed by the S&T mechanism. Mexico suggested that the OEWG should consider any relevant outputs from the S&T mechanism.

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>.