

Thursday 11th December 2025

‘Slow, slow, park, park, slow’: the third day of BWC WG7

An eager student of dance will know that the rhythm of the foxtrot is ‘slow, slow, quick, quick, slow’. Such students would probably be disappointed in the rhythm of proceedings in the Seventh Session of the Working Group (WG) which might best be described as ‘slow, slow, park, park, slow’.

The read-through of the draft report of the WG on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) continued on Wednesday – an activity that took up all six hours of plenary time. There was no evening meeting on Wednesday.

At the end of proceedings on Wednesday, the first read-through had nearly reached the bottom of page 9 of the Chair’s 29-page draft report – progress, of sorts, of roughly a page and a half. The Chair had hoped to finish the read-through of Annex I by the end of the day but WG7 fell three-quarters of a page short of that target. Moreover, additional paragraphs had been parked to return to later.

The Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), again urged delegates to act in a way that could allow the WG to conclude its work in 2025, which meant finishing by the close of business on Friday.

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Some overarching points

It is hard not to conclude that it is taking excessive time to resolve even the most relatively straightforward paragraphs in the draft. The Chair has attempted to reduce the time it takes to deal with each paragraph. In some cases this is through what the current author has previously called ‘consensus by deletion’ – if you can’t agree to it, get rid of it.

One technique the Chair has been using since Monday is to ask delegates with divergent views on a particular paragraph to meet to bring forward a new version that might garner consensus. This speeds up the overall process by not taking up valuable plenary time that can then be used on other paragraphs. Sometimes this has been successful, but when it is not it can be a contributor to consensus by deletion.

Another technique was used from Tuesday at the suggestion of Canada. If only one delegation puts forward an amendment to the draft final report which is not supported by any other delegation, then that amendment is not accepted. A ‘Meyer-ism’ from Monday summarized this: ‘consensus here is not a veto – this is not the Security Council’. This reduced the number of paragraphs being parked.

There were many cases where divergent approaches limited the ability to reach consensus. While most delegations wanted to use the WG to move the BWC forward, there were a few which would want to reach back to the text of the Convention to find language that would achieve consensus. It is uncontested that the text of the BWC itself

(even though some of its provisions were highly contested during the negotiations) should be considered consensus language in BWC meetings, but it is also uncontested that, if the BWC were to have been negotiated half a century later, the language used within the text would be very different from that negotiated in the 1970s. It may be argued that when dealing with a number of the WG topics, repeated use of text from the Convention itself inhibits progress to bringing an effective BWC into the contemporary era to deal with contemporary challenges.

One delegation, Russia, has taken the floor more often than any other to offer suggested changes to the draft report or to respond to amendments proposed by others. This behaviour is consistent with at least two possibilities – that delegation is very focused on ensuring the final report is of a high quality from its perspective; or that delegation is deliberately using up time to run the clock down (so there is not time to complete the work) as an alternative to blocking consensus. Sitting in the room, it is hard to tell the difference. History will be the judge.

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. There are some points worth noting from the sections dealing with the WG topics.

Compliance and verification – WG7 returned to this topic on Wednesday morning to revisit a draft paragraph on the suggestion by Mexico that the Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) on compliance and verification should be able to draw upon any relevant outputs from the S&T mechanism. No conclusion was reached and the Chair invited Mexico, Pakistan and Russia to work together to bring forward a new version.

National implementation of the Convention – There was a long discussion on what national implementation entails, but none of the language used was stronger than earlier consensus texts from Review Conferences or Meetings of States Parties on the need for this to be put into place and regularly reviewed.

Assistance, response and preparedness under Article VII – Much of the discussion on this topic repeated past divergences on positions. Russia introduced amendments connecting some of the activities more specifically to Article VII or Article X. Counter arguments were made on the same grounds as in earlier occasions – that the paramount need is for effective and timely humanitarian assistance (and preparedness that supports this or reduces its need) rather than specifics of which article it was carried out under. On the paragraph relating to guidelines for requesting assistance, the role of the UN Security Council was a point of contention but some consensus language was found to deal with this. However it took considerable time to reach that point.

Organizational, institutional and financial (OIF) arrangements – Kazakhstan suggested adding a phrase using the term ‘international agency for biological security’ to the paragraph on the BWC and a dedicated organization. A similar phrase had been added by Kazakhstan into a relevant paragraph in the discussion on the compliance and verification section on Tuesday. During the Tuesday discussions, Germany had proposed amending the new phrasing in that section but had been unable to get it accepted owing to the ‘no support, no amendment’ practice of the Chair; so that paragraph had been marked as agreed. As the paragraphs in the two sections were very similar, on Wednesday the Chair proposed copying the relevant parts of that agreed text into the OIF section. When Germany indicated it would like to press its amendment, this time with support from others including Kazakhstan, the Chair reacted firmly against this as it would set a precedent for reopening previously agreed paragraphs. From the perspective of this observer, if such a precedent had been set, it would have reduced the chances of reaching agreement on the draft report this week.

The OIF discussion will continue into Thursday.

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>.