

Sunday 10th August 2025

The Sixth Session of the BWC Working Group: setting the scene

The Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) is scheduled to convene in Geneva from 11 to 22 August 2025. The WG was established by the Ninth BWC Review Conference (2022) with seven specific topics listed in paragraph 8 of part II of its final report. These are: (a) international cooperation and assistance (ICA) under Article X; (b) scientific and technological (S&T) developments relevant to the BWC; (c) confidence-building and transparency; (d) compliance and verification; (e) national implementation of the Convention; (f) assistance, response and preparedness under Article VII; and (g) organizational, institutional and financial arrangements. It was suggested that the S&T review and international cooperation and assistance (ICA) mechanisms should be dealt with as additional topics as the relevant paragraphs recording the decision of the Review Conference to work towards establishment of each of these mechanisms (paras. 18 and 19 respectively) included the wording: ‘In order for this mechanism to be established, the Working Group on the strengthening of the Convention will make appropriate recommendations.’

There have been a number of personnel changes as is usual in multi-year multilateral processes. The First WG Session appointed Ambassador Flávio Damico (Brazil) as Chair with Ambassador Camille Petit (France) and Irakli Jgenti (Georgia) as Vice-Chairs. When Ambassador Damico moved to another post in 2024, his compatriot, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer, took up the Chair. The tenure of this initial team was to the end of 2024. Agreement was reached that these people should remain in their posts for 2025. However, a routine rotation means that Ambassador Petit is moving to another posting. The WG is expected to appoint a new Vice-Chair as part of its opening formalities. Other rotations mean that there are some changes to the ‘Friends of the Chair’. These will be listed as each topic is reported.

This session is scheduled to deal with five topics – ICA (Mon 11/Tues 12), S&T developments (Weds 13/Thurs 14), confidence-building and transparency (Fri 15/Mon 18), compliance and verification (Tues 19/Weds 20), and national implementation (Thurs 21/Fri 22). Informal consultations will be convened during the session to discuss the two other paragraph 8 topics. There may also be informal consultations on the rolling text (see below)

Proceedings for public meetings will be video streamed via UN WebTV at <https://media.un.org/en/webtv/> and audio streamed via Listen Live at <https://listen-live.unog.ch/en/index.html> Official documents and other materials are being posted by the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) to the official web page of the Sixth Session which can be found at <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/75240/>

BWC membership

Since the group last met in December 2024 there have been two additions to the membership of the BWC. Comoros deposited its instrument of accession on 14 February with Kiribati depositing its instrument on 20 May, becoming the 188th and 189th BWC states parties, respectively. All Asia-Pacific countries are now parties to the Convention

with only eight states across the rest of the world that have neither ratified nor acceded (although some have signed). Universalization issues are not specifically discussed in the WG as they are within the remit of the annual BWC Meeting of States Parties (MSP) held at the end of each calendar year; however, the MSP in each of 2023 and 2024 has not been able to hold substantive discussions.

Rolling Text

There have been a number of activities since the Fifth Session in efforts to make progress towards consensus. These have included regional seminars, for example. The Chair has been active in engagement with delegations. On 28 July, the Chair wrote to states parties with a 'rolling text'. This was then reproduced a week later as [CRP.1](#) of the Sixth Session, entitled 'Draft specific and effective measures, including possible legally-binding measures, to strengthen and institutionalize the Biological Weapons Convention in all its aspects' and posted on the WG6 website. This had been preceded by an 'elements paper' in May, based on the work carried out in the first five sessions. Feedback from delegations on the elements paper informed the drafting of the rolling text. During a UNDIR webinar the week before WG6, Ambassador Meyer described the rolling text as a tool rather than an outcome in itself. He hoped it would focus discussion on practical questions and so lead to consensus text. He noted there was no language included on the two proposed mechanisms as he would discuss these in a parallel track.

Anniversaries and a possible Special Conference

The Ninth Review Conference was explicit in encouraging the Working Group to complete its work before the end of 2025, if possible – the year that marks the centenary of the 1925 Geneva Protocol and 50 years since the entry into force of the BWC. Many delegates had hoped that these two anniversaries would help focus discussion as this would be a fitting point in which to show significant progress in strengthening the Convention. A proposal during 2024 to hold a Special Conference in 2025 to adopt the two mechanisms had gained substantial momentum but was brought to a sudden halt near the end of WG5 by the expression by one delegation, Russia, of an interpretation of the WG mandate which was not shared by those that wanted to convene the Special Conference in these circumstances. Following past practice, it would not be possible to conclude an outcome at a Special Conference without agreement by consensus. A number of delegations submitted a working paper (WP.21) to the MSP providing their interpretation of the mandate entitled 'On a Special Conference and the ICA and S&T mechanisms'. This was sponsored by: Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Samoa, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Timor-Leste and USA. Some commentators have noted the fiftieth anniversary year for the BWC lasts until March 2026.

Publication schedule for these reports

For each topic under formal discussion, a 'setting the scene' report will be circulated beforehand, so that the one on international cooperation and assistance will be published on Monday and a discussion of the proceedings on the topic can be published on Wednesday. The gap on Tuesday allows for the publication of the setting the scene report on S&T developments. This pattern will be followed over the two weeks. This has been found to be more useful to many readers than a report on the proceedings each day.

Reports in this series from the first five Working Group Sessions (and earlier BWC meetings) are available from the links provided below.

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>.

Monday 11th August 2025

International cooperation and assistance at WG6: setting the scene

The topic scheduled for the first two days of the Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC), is ‘Measures on cooperation and assistance under Article X’. This is topic (a) of those allocated to the WG by the Ninth BWC Review Conference (2022). While the agenda item for this Session is the broader international cooperation and assistance (ICA) topic, it is likely that the possibilities for an ICA mechanism will be the focus of many discussions. Key to getting consensus at the Ninth Review Conference was agreement on enhancing the implementation of Article X through the establishment of some form of mechanism. To this end, paragraph 18 of the Final Document reads: ‘The Conference decides to develop with a view to establishing a mechanism open to all States Parties to facilitate and support the full implementation of international cooperation and assistance under Article X. In order for this mechanism to be established, the Working Group on the strengthening of the Convention will make appropriate recommendations.’

Article X issues in context

Article X embodies a key bargain within the BWC that the renunciation of biological weapons and the implementation of controls over hostile uses of the life sciences have to be balanced so not to hinder the use of the life sciences for peaceful purposes. In addition, Article X provides that states parties ‘undertake to facilitate, and have the right to participate in, the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information for the use of bacteriological (biological) agents and toxins for peaceful purposes’. The concept of ‘cooperation and assistance’ goes further than Article X itself, including aspects such as capacity building. The importance of ICA issues for many countries is reflected by the inclusion of these issues in some form in each of the BWC inter-sessional work programmes since the first was established at the resumed Fifth Review Conference in 2002.

Developments in the life sciences underpin many positive aspects of modern societies. New medical treatments have a substantial human impact and the use of biological technologies and techniques in manufacturing processes support a number of economically significant activities. In recent years, disease outbreaks such as SARS, Ebola Virus Disease and the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the vulnerability of modern societies to the impacts of infectious disease. It has been clearly demonstrated that no country is safe from a highly transmissible disease unless there are capabilities to deal with that disease across the globe. As biological weapons are essentially tools for the deliberate spread of disease, it follows that enhanced capacities to deal with naturally occurring diseases reduce the potential for harm from deliberate disease.

There are long-standing distinct divergences of perspectives between states parties on ICA issues. Many of these derive from security, economic and geographical considerations which influence how individual countries see the balance between the two sides of the bargain embodied in Article X. Where the divergence remains strongest is on the scope of Article X and on the question of how to improve implementation of it. Some delegations have expressed the view in past BWC meetings that Article X is incompatible

with the imposition of economic sanctions (often referred to as ‘unilateral coercive measures’) and that denials of export licences for materials and technologies for peaceful purposes are contrary to Article X. Other delegations have taken an opposite view and have highlighted the challenges of controlling materials and technologies that have peaceful uses as well as having potential to contribute to a biological weapons programme.

This tension is reflected in the WG mandate which notes that any measures it proposes ‘should be formulated and designed in a manner that their implementation supports international cooperation, scientific research and economic and technological development, avoiding any negative impacts.’

As with other BWC measures, Article X does not stand alone. As well as the interactions with security elements of the Convention, there are widely-acknowledged synergies with assistance, response and preparedness activities under Article VII.

An earlier initiative to enhance implementation of Article X was the creation of ‘a database system to facilitate requests for and offers of exchange of assistance and cooperation among States Parties’, often referred to as the ‘Article X database’, by the Seventh Review Conference (2011). A number of delegations have suggested that the database is underused. The Ninth Review Conference (2022) added an ISU staff post which includes some ICA activities.

Discussions in the Working Group

The ICA topic, or the ICA mechanism, has been discussed as an agenda item during the Second (August 2023), Fourth (August 2024) and Fifth (December 2024) WG Sessions. Relevant WG2 working papers include: WP.1 (ASEAN member states), WP.2 (UK), WP.3 [plus Rev.1] (USA and others), WP.5 (Japan), WP.6 (Canada and Philippines), WP.7 (Japan and others), WP.11 (Iran), WP.12 (Iran), WP.13 (Pakistan), WP.14 (China), WP.18 (Russia), WP.21 (Iran) and WP.22 (Georgia, Malawi, Norway and Philippines). The only relevant WG4 paper is: WP.7 (UK). Relevant WG5 papers include: WP.2 (Norway), WP.10 (Russia) and WP.14 (EU).

There have also been a number of informal consultations and an active effort by the Friends of the Chair (FoCs) for this topic – Christian Hope Reyes (Philippines) and Thomas Fetz/Trevor Smith (Canada). The FoCs circulated a non-paper just before the Fifth Session on a possible decision for an ICA mechanism. Much of what was within that was included in a proposal from the Chair for a draft decision by a Special Conference on the two mechanisms that was issued as [CRP.1](#) of WG5 on 8 December 2024. This proposal was brought to a halt on the penultimate evening of WG5 by one delegation; many other delegations have expressed support for continuation.

There is a clear desire to include ICA measures as part of the overall strengthening of the Convention. While the atmosphere towards an ICA mechanism is positive, some differences on possible details remain. Many of the divergences come down to perspectives on what success for the mechanism would mean. For example, from potential donor countries there is a desire to see effective use of funds on practical projects. From potential recipient countries there is a desire to make funding of capacity building projects easier. While these might not seem to be contradictory, one practice from other development areas is the use of a ‘cost-share contribution’ from the recipient states parties to promote sustainability and ownership of projects. This has raised concerns that some potential recipients might find this challenging. One of the yardsticks for success or failure of any potential ICA mechanism the current author has in mind is whether it attracts additional funding from donor countries.

The Rolling Text circulated by the Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), includes some suggested ICA measures including the establishment of an ‘International Biosecurity Education Network’ [this is distinct from an existing NGO activity with a very similar name], a ‘Laboratory Network’ to facilitate partnerships and training, and a ‘capacity-building fellowship programme’.

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Tuesday 12th August 2025

Opening of WG6 and setting the scene for discussion of S&T developments

The Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) was opened on Monday morning with Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil) in the Chair. The plenary was to be held in Room XIX but had been moved to Room XX owing to the need for additional facilities for negotiations on the plastics treaty.

Participants were welcomed by a short video message from Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand and former head of the UN Development Programme. She is currently a member of The Elders and an author of that group's recent policy paper on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response. She called for applying insights from the COVID-19 experience and the 'fragmented approach to biosafety, biosecurity and pandemic risk' to the task of supporting a 'stronger, better-resourced' BWC which she noted lacked 'an independent verification mechanism, sustainable funding and dedicated technical capacity'. Calling for governments to 'move beyond rhetorical support', she concluded: 'Future generations will not judge us on the threats we faced. They will judge us on how we responded to them.'

As discussions on international cooperation and assistance (ICA) issues which started on Monday will continue into Tuesday, these will be reported on Wednesday.

Setting the scene for discussions on S&T developments

The topic scheduled for Wednesday and Thursday of the first week of WG6 is 'Measures on scientific and technological developments relevant to the Convention'. This is topic (b) of those allocated by the Ninth BWC Review Conference (2022). The Conference considered proposals for review of scientific and technological (S&T) developments in some detail, while facing considerable political challenges. In the final week, as successive iterations of the proposed text on S&T review were being produced in attempts to achieve consensus, more and more details were being removed. The Final Document was therefore sparse on this issue area and paragraph 19 reads: 'The Conference decides to develop with a view to establishing a mechanism to review and assess scientific and technological developments relevant to the Convention and to provide States Parties with relevant advice. In order for this mechanism to be established, the Working Group on the strengthening of the Convention will make appropriate recommendations.'

The life sciences have been undergoing rapid developments over recent decades at a pace that has accelerated in recent years. As new discoveries are made, the context the BWC has to operate within changes constantly. Without an understanding of the S&T context, it is impossible to maintain controls over the use of disease as a weapon at either the national or international level. Some of these challenges are amplified as the uses of biological technologies and techniques spread far more widely. There are many of these that may be used and so it is often inadvertently misleading these days to think of a 'biotechnology industry' rather than a range of industries that use biological methods. This adoption of biological techniques has led to more widespread availability and knowledge of materials and processes that may have potential for both peaceful and hostile purposes. Real-world experience has shown that S&T developments proceed at a

faster rate than the developments in policy structures intended to monitor them and, if new risks or benefits are identified, to manage them.

BWC Article XII, which deals with the role of Review Conferences, mandates ‘Such review shall take into account any new scientific and technological developments relevant to the Convention.’ There has been a recognition amongst a large number of states parties that the five-yearly process of briefly reviewing S&T developments during Review Conferences has not been enough – that S&T developments have been moving faster than the policy responses to them. A key challenge is that identifying relevant S&T developments is not enough on its own – once developments are identified, what are their implications? This need to identify implications can perhaps best be illustrated by the contemporary discussions about artificial intelligence. It is clear this particular field has been the subject of significant advances in recent years and while some implications are readily apparent, it is clear that there are likely to be more that will emerge. The same is true for many developments that are specifically in the life sciences. One example, much cited, is the CRISPR/Cas9 gene tool (often simply referred to as CRISPR) that allows for exact and accurate editing of genetic sequences. What are the implications for regulation to prevent its hostile use? Even in the relatively short time that this technique has been in more than simply experimental use, perceptions of these have changed.

Discussions in the WG

The S&T topic, or the associated proposed mechanism, were discussed during the Second (August 2023), Fourth (August 2024) and Fifth (December 2024) WG Sessions. Many relevant working papers were submitted to WG2 with the three referred to most often in plenary being WP.4 (US), WP.8 (UK) and WP.12 (Iran); and of those focused on a possible mechanism, the three referred to most often in plenary were WP.9 (UK), WP.16 (Russia) and WP.19 (Iran). One relevant paper was submitted to WG4: WP.6 (UK); as was the case in WG5: WP.17 (EU).

While most aspects of strengthening the BWC have synergies with other areas, the better understanding of S&T developments impacts across a broad swath of BWC activities which have been highlighted, including: verification, international cooperation and assistance, preparedness and response, and national implementation.

When BWC states parties first looked in detail at how the review of S&T developments could be enhanced, most contributions to discussions looked at one or other of two models – a panel, committee or board selected by some criteria to have a limited membership or a structure open to experts from all states parties willing to participate. Each of these approaches has advantages and disadvantages. More recently, many proposals have taken a hybrid approach that includes an open arrangement with some activities delegated to smaller panels. In recent discussions, most delegates that expressed a preference were happy with a hybrid model as from most perspectives it contains the elements they want even if it includes elements they were not so keen on having included. The number of explicit preferences indicated for either a limited-membership committee/board or of a body open to all states parties have significantly reduced over time. Underpinning most comments on reviews was a sentiment that any S&T process should be led by science and not by politics.

There have also been a number of informal consultations and an active effort by the Friends of the Chair (FoCs) for this topic – Grisselle Rodríguez (Panama), Peter Babigumira Ahabwe (Uganda) and Kiseok Michael Kang (Republic of Korea). There were various iterations of FoC papers on this topic, much of which was reflected in the December 2024 proposal from the Chair for a draft decision by a Special Conference on the two mechanisms and the Chair’s rolling text circulated shortly before this session.

The S&T section of the rolling text, which doesn’t include any detail relating to a possible S&T mechanism, is focused on activities for governance of research such as codes of conduct, guidelines and regulations as well as for foresight techniques.

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Wednesday 13th August 2025

International cooperation and assistance: discussions at WG6

The Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) discussed the topic of 'Measures on cooperation and assistance under Article X' on Monday and Tuesday. Part of Monday morning was taken up with relatively brief opening formalities and the Helen Clark video. Part of Tuesday afternoon was taken up with an exchange of views in an informal setting on Article VII issues convened by the Friends of the Chair on that topic – Sofie Kallehauge (Denmark) and Angel Dalmazzo (Argentina).

The Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), has opened plenary meetings promptly which some delegates are not used to. He also stressed he wanted to maximize working time and so wanted to keep interactions in the room focused on the BWC and not let external geopolitics take time from the discussions.

Many interventions during these two days welcomed the two new states parties, Comoros and Kiribati, and both attended the WG. Some states parties participated in the WG for the first time, such as Bhutan and Gambia.

There were two ICA-focused working papers made available during the two days. One was from Russia (WP.1) on operational principles for the ICA mechanism. The other was from Australia (WP.4) on its Article X activities in the Indo-Pacific.

There were three group statements made in plenary: by South Africa on behalf of the African Group, by Cabo Verde on behalf of the Portuguese-speaking states and by Uganda on behalf of the non-aligned. There were numerous states parties making interventions and listing them would take up too much space.

Discussions on ICA and the rolling text

There was a solid set of agreed elements around the need for improved ICA activities. However, as in earlier discussions, there was a variety of positions taken on how to turn aspiration into reality. Old divergences on sanctions and export controls were raised without really moving the debate forward. The main items in the rolling text such as an 'International Biosecurity Education Network', a 'Laboratory Network' and a 'capacity-building fellowship programme' received positive comments. Some saw these as new suggestions while others saw them as logical extensions of things already being done. Concerns were raised about duplication with activities under other international regimes that had some similarities, such as other laboratory networks. Some felt the rolling text contained superfluous detail while others felt they needed more details on what was being proposed. As the rolling text is to focus discussion on what the WG might recommend to the Tenth Review Conference (2027), or a Special Conference, the suggestion was made to reformulate it as if it were a draft decision of either Conference.

Some cost estimates for possible activities were provided by the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU). These have been posted, alongside other meeting documents, to the official WG6 web page at <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/75240/>

Discussions on the proposed mechanism

The desire for an effective mechanism was expressed by numerous delegations. However, it was apparent from the views expressed that there was no clear shared perception of what

would constitute effectiveness. There was significant consensus on many elements of the proposal by the Chair from December 2024, but also some areas to be resolved which the Chair specifically asked delegates to consider.

Structure – there was common ground that there should be a ‘Steering Group’ comprised of up to 20 states to manage the implementation of the mechanism but there remained a question over how these should be selected. Could BWC observers such as the EU be part of it? There was consensus that there should be an ‘Advisory Group’ composed of all states parties, but as a distinct activity or more practical to make it an agenda item of the annual Meeting of States Parties (MSP)? There were arguments both ways with no clear conclusion. One issue was whether the Advisory Group could question what the Steering Group had proposed as its package of annual activities. Some interventions expressed a desire for this, arguing that all states parties should have an input into the decisions within the ICA mechanism. Others suggested that to have the larger group revisiting in detail the work of the smaller group would duplicate effort and possibly lead to a lack of consensus if there were disagreements in the larger group. This implied the larger group could take decisions. Over the years, the question of whether MSPs could take decisions has been controversial – there are some who insist that a Review Conference is the only BWC body that can take decisions; others suggest that a Review Conference can delegate any of its powers to another meeting. There seemed to be common ground that the Advisory Group could not be given greater powers than an MSP. A rhetorical question was posed – since the states parties attending an MSP are the same as go to a Review Conference, and are often sitting in the same room for each gathering, how is it we can trust them to have the wisdom to be correct only once in every five years?

ICA Trust Fund – should the source of funds be wholly voluntary, wholly from assessed contributions, or some form of hybrid arrangement? Arguments in favour of voluntary funding included that it allowed for flexibility and that there had been successful examples of fundraising this way. The arguments against included that it reduced predictability of funding as available funds may vary between years. This discussion also revealed a sometimes rather subtle distinction between those who perceived voluntary contributions to such a fund as donations and those who saw them as an investment in greater security for all against biological threats. Arguments expressed in favour of assessed contributions included that all states parties would have ‘ownership’ of the mechanism and those against included that this would mean developing countries were paying towards their own assistance. There was some discussion on whether projects under the mechanism should be voluntary funded while assessed contributions covered the administrative costs. It was highlighted that the Trust Fund for the Arms Trade Treaty is administered using voluntary funds. Pakistan revisited a proposal it had made in WP.13 of WG2 which featured ‘voluntary but assessed contributions’ to ensure predictability which garnered some supportive responses but also concerns that targets for funding generated this way might become limits instead.

Cost share contribution – this remained perhaps the area of strongest divergence. Many interventions suggested that even a small contribution by the recipient state would be seen as a barrier to participation; others repeated the ownership and sustainability arguments that have been made previously in favour of such a contribution.

Should being in financial arrears preclude access to the ICA mechanism? – this also remained inconclusive, although positions in favour of this were much less strongly held than for the cost share contribution. Those opposed saw this as another potential barrier to participation.

Editorial Note: in times past there would often be a disconnect in BWC meeting rooms between diplomats and scientists – each were trying to get to grips with the perspectives of the other and it took some time to find some common working practices. In an echo of this, there now seems to be a similar disconnect between diplomats and project implementers. Working through this may be key to success in the ICA area.

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Thursday 14th August 2025

Confidence-building and transparency at WG6: setting the scene

The plenary topic at the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) for Friday 15th and Monday 18th is scheduled to be ‘Measures on confidence-building and transparency’. This is topic (c) of those allocated to the WG.

The BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) produced a background information document on this topic during July. This have been posted, alongside other meeting documents and statements, to the official WG6 web page which can be found at <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/75240/>

Confidence-building and transparency issues in context

Issues of confidence-building and transparency are connected with understandings about compliance and verification. The key difference is that the former are usually less formal arrangements and the latter are legally binding measures. While some analysts would consider these two distinctly separate activities, many others would consider them as being different points on a continuum. It is broadly agreed that the level of detail in BWC Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) and other transparency activities is not sufficient to consider them tools to be used to assess compliance of states parties with BWC obligations. However, the conceptual exercise to consider what it is that states parties should know about each other in order to raise confidence in compliance is a useful contribution to concepts of verification. Issues of compliance and verification are scheduled for discussion in the second week of WG6.

The BWC system of CBMs provides for annual returns to be provided by states parties on particular relevant activities and facilities. The Second BWC Review Conference (1986) agreed: ‘that the States Parties are to implement, on the basis of mutual co-operation, the following measures, in order to prevent or reduce the occurrence of ambiguities, doubts and suspicions, and in order to improve international co-operation in the field of peaceful bacteriological (biological) activities’. The CBM forms were last updated at the Seventh BWC Review Conference (2011). States parties can choose to make their CBM returns public and this can help make the process more transparent. Lack of clarity about what is achieved through the CBM system may be an inhibitory influence on the number of CBM returns.

The submission rate for CBM returns has been steadily increasing each year for the last decade or so. There had been a minor peak in 2016 – the year of the Eighth BWC Review Conference which focused attention on the subject. There was a small dip in 2017 but since then the submission rate has been rising. The three-figure milestone was passed in 2023 when 106 returns were submitted. There were 113 in 2024 and, at the time of writing, the ISU CBM website indicates there have been 101 returns so far in 2025 with the most recent received on 11 August from Nigeria. There is therefore potential for 2025 to be another record year. Nevertheless, there are now 189 states parties so there remains considerable room for numerical improvement.

Many proposals have been made over the years in an effort to improve the

CBM system in some way. In most cases terms such as to ‘strengthen’ or ‘enhance’ CBMs have been used but there have not been common perspectives on what this means in practical terms. For example, if CBMs are simplified in such a way that it takes less effort to fill them in – especially by reducing the level of detail in the information passed on – will the information be as valuable? On the other hand, if requirements for additional information were to be adopted, would this reduce the number of returns?

Progress has been made to ease the logistics for submitting returns through an electronic portal. There has been encouragement for a step-by-step approach for states parties that has been promoted by Japan that allows states parties initially to submit only the forms for which they have the available information and thus allowing more time for collation of data for other forms.

There have been a number of proposals made in recent years for voluntary transparency measures through which states can provide evidence that they are in compliance with their BWC obligations. There are long-standing divergences of views on these. Some states parties see these as distraction from developing formal verification measures while others see them as ways to test ideas that might help develop future multilateral compliance and verification thinking.

As in other areas of the BWC, this issue area does not operate in isolation. Preparation of CBM returns or participation in transparency activities can help governments with national implementation. Not only does the activity of collating the information provide a check that the government is aware of all of the relevant activities under its jurisdiction or control, it also promotes interaction between ministries, departments and agencies that have relevant responsibilities but do not routinely communicate with each other on BWC issues. It can also identify gaps where capacity-building activities might be useful under ICA efforts.

Discussions in the Working Group and the rolling text

This topic was previously discussed in the Third (December 2023) and Fifth (December 2024) Sessions. WG3 working papers focused on CBMs include: WP.4 (Russia), WP.6 (UK), WP.7 (Uganda), WP.9 [plus Rev.1] (USA) and WP.16 (EU). Those from WG5 include: WP.8 (Russia) and WP.19 (EU). During both WG sessions there were additional papers on compliance and verification issues that touched upon confidence-building and transparency issues. There have been few specific CBM proposals. Russia has suggested amendments to the CBM forms, in particular on military biomedical activities conducted by states parties on the territory of other states and on animal vaccine production facilities.

As in other WG topics, there have been active Friends of the Chair. The Friends of the Chair for this topic, Laurent Masméjean (Switzerland) and Angel Horna (Peru) circulated a ‘food-for-thought paper’ to delegations in November 2024. This had been based on an early reflections paper which had been discussed online in June of that year and then further developed. The Friends of the Chair noted that proposals to enable greater participation in the CBM system fell in four sub-areas: providing enhanced guidance and tailored support; taking steps to facilitate the reporting process; easing the burden of submitting CBMs; and increasing incentives to participate in CBMs.

The rolling text circulated by the Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), shortly before WG6 draws on a number of the ideas contained in the papers from the Friends of the Chair. The relevant section of the rolling text is particularly focused on CBMs, presumably as this is more likely to generate consensus text. There is the suggestion of an ISU-led training programme on preparing CBM returns; support for the step-by-step approach; inclusion of CBM preparation in international cooperation and assistance (ICA) projects; improvement of the platform for electronic submission of CBMs; and launch of a review process to discuss possible CBM system changes.

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Friday 15th August 2025

Scientific and technological (S&T) developments: discussions at WG6

The topic discussed on Wednesday and Thursday was ‘Measures on scientific and technological developments relevant to the Convention’. On Wednesday morning some additional statements were made on international cooperation and assistance (ICA) issues. By Thursday lunchtime, no further delegations wanted to take the floor for S&T discussions, the Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), therefore moved to the next item on the agenda ‘Measures on confidence-building and transparency’ that had been scheduled to start on Friday. Those discussions will be covered in a later report. Part of Thursday afternoon was also taken up with a further exchange of views in an informal setting on Article VII issues convened by the Friends of the Chair on that topic. The number of delegates in the plenary dropped during Thursday as many were called to assist their colleagues in the plastics treaty negotiations.

There was one working paper on S&T issues which was from Russia (WP.2) on fundamental principles of the proposed S&T mechanism.

Group statements were delivered by South Africa for the African Group and by China for Brazil, China and Pakistan. The Uganda statement delivered on behalf of the non-aligned on Tuesday included a section on S&T issues.

Discussions on S&T and the rolling text

Most interventions were in support, at least in principle, of the suggestions in the rolling text. Many positions reflected delegations’ overall positions on the BWC – i.e., those focused on security aspects of the BWC emphasised the inputs into understanding new threats and challenges from S&T review processes; while those focused on development issues highlighted ICA benefits. Significantly, neither side of this divergence was critical of the other perspective which generated an atmosphere of broad acceptance of other positions. As with any discussion about textual outputs, there were many interventions on potential clarifications or streamlining of language. None of these were discussed in any way that might indicate whether there was clear support for them around the room.

A number of statements highlighted the lack of effective S&T review in existing arrangements and the need for greater vigilance in this area. Not only should this vigilance need to be more detailed than before, but it should be constant and ongoing. There were explicit acknowledgements that promoting responsible innovation would underpin the right to peaceful uses under Article X. Such promotion would also have to be relevant to the diverse contexts around the globe in which research is carried out and thus arrangements would have to be inclusive.

As with any suggestion of doing something new, there were concerns raised about possible duplication. A number of references to sources of expertise or standards on biosafety and biosecurity were made with the encouragement that they should not be overlooked or forgotten by any BWC processes. Examples cited included World Health Organization (WHO) guidance on the responsible use of the life sciences and standards set by ISO, the International Organization for Standards.

Some paragraphs within the rolling text made specific references to particular technologies. There was caution expressed about being too specific as the text being

discussed was intended to be part of a Review Conference or Special Conference decision and S&T would move on and new areas of concern would emerge. The phrase used by some delegates was that the text should be ‘technology-agnostic’ in order to stand the test of time. [Note: many analysts have attributed the comprehensive coverage of the BWC itself across the life sciences for five decades to the fact it does not include in its definitions any particular technologies to be controlled. It is thus regarded as being as ‘future-proof’ as it could be.]

Some cost estimates for potential S&T activities were presented by the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU). These are to be posted, alongside other meeting documents, to the official WG6 web page at <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/75240/>

The proposed S&T review mechanism

There was a sense of frustration in many interventions that it was taking so long to adopt an S&T mechanism as well as the ICA mechanism. Phrases were used such as ‘it is time to move beyond aspirations’. While it is clear that there are some remaining issues to clarify there was a sense by many that the mechanisms should be adopted as soon as possible. [Note: while the proposed ICA and S&T mechanisms are distinct activities, political linkages have developed over the years, such that neither is likely to be adopted without the other and so progress on each of them relies on progress on the other. This has led to some mirroring of arrangements within each of the mechanisms.] There were fewer specific questions from the WG Chair, than there had been for the ICA mechanism.

Structure – as with the ICA mechanism, there is a wider group comprising all states parties which in the S&T proposal is known as the Review Group; and there is a smaller group called the Reporting Committee. The question of how the membership of the Reporting Committee should be selected remains outstanding. It was noted that the parallels with the ICA mechanism are less useful as the membership of the Committee should be based on individual independent expertise whereas the ICA Steering Group would be comprised of representatives from governments. In trying to find a precedent for a procedure for selection of the smaller group for each of the mechanisms, the Chair noted that each BWC Review Conference appoints a General Committee (sometimes referred to as the Bureau) that is about the same size as the smaller bodies in the two mechanisms. There was some discussion of the logic of this process which did not reach any firm conclusions. To ensure geographical balance, the role of regional groups is important. The BWC has only three regional groups with fairly long formal names but which can be summarised as the Western Group, the Eastern Group and the Non-Aligned Group. These are rooted in the Cold War-era origins of the BWC. Russia has declared itself to be a ‘Group of One’, a move not without its own controversies. Many interventions made reference to the limitations this group system would have for selection of membership of the Reporting Committee. The most common suggestion for use in this case was the UN system of five regional groups.

Outputs – both the smaller and larger bodies will need to produce some form of reporting. The BWC has historically operated on the basis of consensus. However, the term consensus can be very different in an academic setting from a diplomatic one. In academic terms, a consensus can simply mean a broad agreement whereas in diplomacy it means a position that no one is actively disagreeing with. As the WG Chair has noted more than once, a diplomatic consensus is not one that everyone is happy about, but one that everyone can live with. There is still ambiguity about how outputs from an S&T mechanism would interact with national policy and assessment processes.

Scope – some questions were raised on the scope of the mechanism. Should it include compliance and verification issues, for example; especially if there is an open-ended working group on that topic established at the same time? Would each bring different perspectives into discussion or would this be a duplication of effort?

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Monday 18th August 2025

The WG6 halfway point and setting the scene for compliance and verification

At the end of the first week of Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) the proceedings are running ahead of schedule. The Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), has moved on to the next scheduled topic when the previous one has been exhausted for the moment. In addition, time was found on Friday afternoon to have an open exchange taking stock of the current situation. This discussion, plus those on confidence-building and transparency, will be covered in a later report. Overall, the atmosphere of the plenary is broadly positive, although there are occasional hints from delegations that have blocked progress in the past that key divergences remain.

Compliance and verification in context

It has often been noted that the BWC is the only core WMD convention without an associated verification regime. One factor is that biological materials can be hard to verify through material balances (as chemical and nuclear materials can be by checking that quantities of particular materials going in and out of a process or facility) because living organisms reproduce and die. While lessons may be learned from implementation of verification arrangements within other regimes, it is not possible to simply adopt a system from another regime. For example, the chemical control system was not copied and pasted from the nuclear regime, but lessons were learned from it.

There remains a lack of a shared understanding of the underlying concept of verification and that of compliance in the context of the BWC. This may be a consequence of the lack of detailed discussion on this topic for over 20 years. There is some common ground around understanding compliance as the goal and verification as a tool to contribute to this. There is a shared acceptance that there is no single technique that deals with all aspects of things that might be considered desirable to verify, but no common list of what might be the physical items subject to verification, be they laboratories, other facilities or stocks of pathogens.

There had been a group of government experts to identify and examine potential verification measures from a scientific and technical standpoint that had become known as 'VEREX'. This identified 21 potential on-site and off-site verification measures which it reported in September 1993 that 'some of the potential verification measures would contribute to strengthening the effectiveness and improve the implementation of the Convention, also recognizing that appropriate and effective verification could reinforce the Convention'. This led to creation of an Ad Hoc Group (AHG) to consider a legally binding protocol to strengthen the BWC including verification measures. In 2001 the AHG failed to reach consensus on its work. Therefore the scientific and technical aspects of verifying compliance with the BWC have not been a thoroughly examined since completion of the VEREX report in 1993.

The general purpose criterion (that prohibitions apply to materials and technologies unless for peaceful purposes) that underpins the Convention is widely recognized by analysts as being key to understanding compliance, but it rarely gets mentioned directly at a diplomatic level. As many materials and technologies could be

used for both peaceful and hostile purposes getting implementation of the general purpose criterion correct is vital to ensure compliance measures do not hinder peaceful uses.

A theme of WG6 has been looking at the costs of measures that might be adopted to strengthen the BWC. There are challenges to understanding the balances between costs and benefits in this topic that don't apply to other WG topics. For example, if a decision is taken to double expenditure for international cooperation and assistance (ICA) projects it is reasonable to assume that twice as much capacity-building or other benefits would result from this. However, when it comes to verification, doubling the expenditure does not double the level of confidence in compliance. While it can be tempting to think of verification and compliance as a purely technical topic, it has at its core a policy-driven question: how much verification is enough?

Discussions in the WG and the rolling text

This topic was previously discussed during the Third (December 2023) and Fifth (December 2024) Sessions. Working papers focused on (or with significant sections on) compliance and verification from WG3 include: WP.5 (Russia), WP.6 (UK), WP.8/Rev.1 (Denmark, Kenya, Malawi, Montenegro, Norway, Panama, Singapore, Thailand and Uruguay), WP.9/Rev.1 (USA), WP.10 (China), WP.11 (Iran), WP.13 (Russia), WP.17 (EU). Those from WG5 include: WP.6/Rev.2 (France with co-sponsors), WP.7 (Germany), WP.9 (Russia), WP.11 (Switzerland), and WP.13 (EU).

As with other WG topics, there have been active Friends of the Chair – Ambassador Robert in den Bosch (Netherlands) and Alonso Martínez (Mexico). In 2023 they identified three criteria for any arrangements: politically palatable, technologically feasible, and financially viable. In many ways this would come down to a question of how much to pay for what levels of effectiveness. Further work by the Friends of the Chair led to the conclusion that there was need for something like an open-ended working group (OEWG) to deal with the challenge that there is common ground on the need for verification of some sort but quite a diversity of perspectives on the details of how it might be carried out.

The proposal for an OEWG has been raised already during WG6 when questions about how it might interact with activities to review scientific and technological developments and to provide S&T advice. The possibility of duplication is likely to be discussed further.

A key sub-topic at the WG has been how to deal with past negotiations. Several states parties have indicated that the VEREX study and negotiations within the AHG may contain some useful elements for discussions within the WG. The number of calls to return to either of the texts being worked on at the AHG has reduced as the WG has discussed this topic further. Ambassador Meyer noted during WG5, while discussing the history: 'Last but not least, we should also recall that there were still wide divergences among states parties on the many fundamental issues in the text being negotiated by the Ad Hoc Group'. [Note: the Chair was posted in Geneva on the disarmament delegation of Brazil during the last stages of activity in the AHG.]

The longest section of the rolling text circulated by the Chair shortly before WG6 is on compliance and verification. The vast majority of the language in this section is about the proposed OEWG, for which it suggests a mandate in paragraph 21 for examining 'concrete compliance and verification measures, including possible legally-binding measures, aimed at building confidence in compliance, and detecting and deterring non-compliance' adapted to the biological field. The OEWG 'will consider the political, technical, legal, personnel and financial aspects of any proposed compliance and verification measures'. The text gives suggestions for administration and operation of the OEWG. In particular, it suggests in paragraph 23 that the OEWG should address seven specific issues and the scope of these are likely to be discussed during WG6.

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Tuesday 19th August 2025

Confidence-building and transparency plus taking stock: discussions at WG6

The third plenary topic at the Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) was 'Measures on confidence-building and transparency' – topic (c) of those allocated by the Ninth BWC Review Conference (2022). Discussion on this topic had been scheduled for Friday and Monday (15th and 18th) but started on Thursday as proceedings had been running ahead of schedule. The Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), has moved on to the next scheduled topic when the previous one has been exhausted for the moment. In addition, time was found on Friday afternoon to have an open exchange taking stock of the current situation.

Before the stock take session, there was a brief further look at costs for scientific and technological (S&T) activities including the proposed mechanism. One notable point was if the costs of travel for experts for the smaller body were not funded via assessed contributions would this compromise their independence?

Confidence-building and transparency

Discussion on this topic started with a briefing by Daniel Feakes, Chief of the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU), who described how the CBM system operated. He noted positive trends in numbers, especially for those submitting for the first time. This presentation has been posted, alongside other meeting documents and statements, to the official WG6 web page at <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/75240/>.

The subsequent discussion included a number of general points but otherwise was very focused around points in the rolling text circulated by the Chair shortly before WG6.

There were many references to CBMs being the only formal transparency tool under the Convention. They are considered a practical way to build trust. They can promote compliance but not be used to assess it as they are not designed as compliance tools. Nonetheless, the connections with compliance and verification were prominent in the discussions. While it was noted that there was some overlap with the sorts of information that might have to be submitted as declarations under a verification system, it was made clear that they could not be the model for declarations. In short, CBMs are what they are and cannot simply be dropped into a compliance and verification system. Some delegations expressed a preference for developing verification measures rather than improving CBMs.

Methods by which CBMs might be improved were discussed. It was noted that any proposals for additions to reporting have to be carefully considered – the balance between extensiveness of information supplied (more useful to understand national activities) and reporting burden (greater burden being likely to reduce the number of returns) was considered important. Simplification of the process of submitting returns was seen as useful but a note of caution was expressed that electronic platforms should not be the exclusive method of submission in case it leaves states parties behind who can only use other methods of submission. Bhutan suggested that the primary obstacle to producing returns was resource availability rather than political will and that any review of

CBMs should heed the lived experience of smaller states. This was echoed by other delegations. Initial submissions via the step-by-step approach were encouraged, but that this should only be a transition phase with full returns remaining the aim.

While most suggestions in the rolling text were accepted as being based on past proposals, the CBM assistance network was highlighted as to whether it was a new proposal. This was first put forward in 2012 and has resurfaced in various forms since. It was noted that activities to promote and enable compilation of CBM returns had considerable overlap with international cooperation and assistance (ICA) efforts under the BWC. Questions were asked about the number and types of CBM-related training events as they had been held at global, regional and national levels. It was noted that different courses had different focuses. A delegate from Belarus highlighted that they had participated in a CBM course, confirming that it was of high quality and that the course was not politicized.

There was much restating of previous positions about whether CBM returns were completely voluntary or whether their politically binding nature encompassed some obligations to participate. The suggestion for resolving this divergence by making CBM returns mandatory was supported in a number of interventions. There were calls for more CBM returns to be made public.

While much of the discussion was focused on CBMs, there were other voluntary transparency measures mentioned, such as peer review or the creation of an exchange platform. Some interventions expressed support for inclusion of references in the rolling text to voluntary measures while others expressed opposition to this.

Taking stock on Friday afternoon

With the WG running ahead of schedule, the Chair took the opportunity to invite delegates to indicate briefly one or two issues they considered most essential to resolve in the areas discussed so far in WG6 with the aim of seeking greater clarity of where delegates saw the greatest need for further work and where convergence might be close. He also asked delegates where they were aiming for in terms of potential cost implications of proposals currently under discussion and whether cost estimates should be a determining factor in shaping the scope and composition of the mechanisms.

The most common response to priorities was for establishing the ICA and S&T mechanisms. There were recollections of the energy of the Ninth Review Conference which, before the political challenges of the final few days, had some very positive moments. In relation to the two mechanisms, the Final Document from 2022 says ‘decides to develop’ and this was highlighted as meaning the decision to develop the mechanisms has already been taken by the Review Conference. This was contrasted with the mandate for discussion of the seven topics. The selection of the smaller bodies in each of the mechanisms as well as governance of the mechanisms were highlighted as issues needing resolving.

Overall, the tone of the exchanges was more positive than much of the discussions on the specific agenda items had been, although there were points made by delegations that have blocked progress in the past that illustrated key divergences remain.

It was noted that there was no scenario in which the BWC could be strengthened without an increase in its budget. Ambassador Leonardo Bencini (Italy), President of the Ninth Review Conference, noted how modest the BWC budget was and, with a tone of frustration, said: ‘There is a complete imbalance between the risk that we are facing and the resources that we have been willing to devote to this so far.’ He added: ‘if we are talking about strengthening the BWC, we have to be ready to put more money into it’.

Desires were expressed for the WG to finish its mandate effectively and within the allotted timeframe. There were many expressions of flexibility by delegations, which were welcomed by the Chair, and which indicated political will to make progress. The Chair thanked delegates for sharing their views.

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Wednesday 20th August 2025

National implementation at WG6: setting the scene

The final plenary topic at the Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) is 'Measures on national implementation of the Convention'. This is topic (e) of those allocated to the WG by the Ninth BWC Review Conference (2022). Discussion on this topic had been scheduled for Thursday and Friday of this week but started on Tuesday as proceedings had been running ahead of schedule. The Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), has moved on to the next scheduled topic when the previous one has been exhausted for the time being.

Discussions on the topic of compliance and verification which finished on Tuesday will be covered in a later report.

National implementation issues in context

In order for any treaty to have its aims or aspirations put into practice there has to be a level of implementation activity. Without effective implementation, any treaty is essentially just a declaration of intent. Each of the treaties controlling weapons of mass destruction (WMD) therefore obliges states parties to carry out some form of national implementation to fulfil the obligations undertaken. In the case of the BWC, Article IV reads: 'Each State Party to this Convention shall, in accordance with its constitutional processes, take any necessary measures to prohibit and prevent the development, production, stockpiling, acquisition, or retention of the agents, toxins, weapons, equipment and means of delivery specified in article I of the Convention, within the territory of such State, under its jurisdiction or under its control anywhere.' In addition, BWC Article III contains obligations not to assist others (not just states) to acquire biological weapons. A balance has to be struck with Article III obligations to ensure that direct and indirect transfers relevant to the Convention, to any recipient whatsoever, are authorized only when the intended use is for purposes not prohibited under the BWC.

Articles I and III are what is known as negative obligations, i.e., promises NOT to do something. Other commitments under the BWC, such as Article VII or Article X, are positive obligations, i.e., promises to do things. Article IV is a positive obligation to self-enforce a negative obligation.

The phrasing of Article IV is a reminder that the BWC is not a treaty between governments but a treaty between states, hence the term states parties. This is important for two reasons. One is that when there is a change of government within a state the obligations under the BWC still apply to that state, as was illustrated by the change of government in Syria in 2024. The other is that the provisions of the Convention apply to all activities within states parties, not just those owned or operated by the government.

There are many synergies and overlaps with other provisions of the Convention. For example, capacity-building activities for enhancing national implementation overlap with efforts under international cooperation and assistance (ICA) associated with Article X. There are areas of overlap between national implementation and understanding scientific and technological (S&T) developments as national implementation has to be

effective in any changing S&T context – a key reason why any BWC system for S&T review needs to be able to inform and assist national policy processes. There are also key overlaps with compliance and verification issues as much of the work of verification of a treaty, such as compiling declarations, is done at a national level and then assessed by an international body; accurate declarations are difficult without effective implementation. One of the arguments in favour of routine visits by an international inspectorate to facilities is that it encourages states to ensure declaration data is accurate and up to date. Without routine visits, there is less incentive to maintain rigorous implementation at a national level.

National implementation has many facets – from security of pathogens (i.e., disease-causing micro-organisms) to controls on certain types of equipment or technologies. One of the lessons of past revelations of illicit trading networks of proliferation-sensitive materials and technologies was that countries can be host to companies that are contributing to proliferation activities without the relevant governmental authorities being aware. Effective national implementation therefore includes much more than simply the enactment of legislation.

There are many reasons why a state party might have incomplete or ineffective national implementation. For some, this may start with a lack of specific implementation legislation owing to challenges in finding parliamentary time against competing priorities. For others it may be resource limitations that mean legislation is not properly enforced.

BWC national implementation is not carried out in isolation. For example, some provisions overlap with those required to implement UN Security Council resolution 1540 which is focused on preventing access to WMD-relevant materials to those who might use them for acts of terror. Indeed, for some states parties this is the key aim of assisting others in enhancing national implementation. Other provisions, such as disease surveillance, overlap with national public health measures. A further example is that regulations for the control of biological laboratories overlap with health and safety provisions and therefore issues of public safety.

As national circumstances and legal and political systems vary between countries, it has long been recognised that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for implementation arrangements. At the same time, there has been recognition that there are many lessons to be learned by states parties from the implementation experience of others. There has been progress in recent years in the number of states parties which have appointed national contact points (NCPs). There have been clear benefits resulting from regular workshops involving NCP personnel.

Discussions in the Working Group and the rolling text

The topic of national implementation has only been formally on the agenda of the Second Session (August 2023). Relevant working papers from that session include: WP.7 (Japan, co-sponsored by Canada and Germany), WP.10 (UK), WP.17 (Russia), WP.20 (USA) and WP.26 (Ukraine). The Fifth Session had relevant papers which included WP.3 (India and USA) and WP.15 (EU).

There have also been a number of informal consultations and an active effort by the Friends of the Chair for this topic – Grisselle Rodríguez (Panama), Athikarn Dilogwathana (Thailand), Reski Ilahi (Indonesia), and Claudia Henfry (Australia).

Section E of the rolling text circulated by the Chair shortly before WG6 is on national implementation. It is the shortest section of the rolling text and mostly covers encouragement of states parties to enhance national implementation for themselves and for others. This includes encouragement to: develop and implement codes of conduct and biological risk management standards for relevant facilities; ensure the consistent and timely submission of CBM forms; establish NCPs; and conduct activities on awareness-raising, education and engagement.

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Thursday 21st August 2025

Compliance and verification: discussions at WG6

Discussions on the compliance and verification topic at the Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) had been scheduled for Tuesday and Wednesday of this week but started on Monday and finished on Tuesday as proceedings had been running ahead of schedule. The Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), has moved on to the next scheduled topic rather than stick to a rigid programme of work.

The plenary room was used for informal consultations moderated by Friends of the Chair on the topic of organizational, institutional and financial arrangements on Monday afternoon and on compliance and verification during parts of Tuesday.

Tuesday was World Humanitarian Day; to mark this the plenary held a minute's silence to pay tribute to all those colleagues who lost their lives in humanitarian service.

Discussions on compliance and verification issues

It was clearly recognized that establishing a compliance and verification system will be one of the most complex tasks for BWC states parties. There were many questions that remained. What is considered compliance? What are the obligations being complied with? Earlier observations that compliance was the goal and verification a means to achieve it were restated, but trying to read between the lines of some statements it would seem that there are other perceptions of the relationship between compliance and verification. What is the required level of confidence in compliance? There was a general acceptance that no verification system was perfect, but there was an unstated question – how close to perfection is acceptable?

There was some commonality on what were objects that might be verified in terms of laboratories and of production facilities for biological products, but some variation on the scope of activities. Pathogen collections were seen as needing verifying.

There was more commonality on methods for verification suitable for the BWC with a shared perspective that they begin with national data collection that is submitted as a declaration to a multilateral body. Such declarations would then be evaluated by that body. At this point some divergences appeared with varying views on what other measures might be used at that stage; however there was little detail in this discussion. Some concerns were raised about any use of 'open sources', although this term is very broad and no distinction was made in interventions between types of open sources.

A need for flexibility to be able to deal with future threats was highlighted. International agreements are shaped by the concerns at the forefront of the minds of the negotiators during the period in which they are negotiated, making them creatures of their time. However, the contexts they have to operate in can change and verification tools appropriate for the current situation may need to be updated to be appropriate for the contexts in future decades.

A number of interventions suggested that compliance and verification measures should only apply to negative obligations, such as the Article I obligation not to have biological weapons. Others wanted the scope to be broader to include provisions such as

Article X. There was common ground that there would need to be arrangements to investigate any allegations of use. Some interventions noted the investigative mechanism under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General and stressed that they would not want to see this impacted upon until a verification system had been established and was in force.

There were many supportive statements for the idea of holding an open-ended working group (OEWG) that could meet for 20 working days per year, with some suggesting that this should be a priority. There were suggestions that perhaps a single decision document could agree the establishment of the OEWG together with the scientific and technological (S&T) review mechanism and the international cooperation and assistance (ICA) mechanism. Others suggested that an early agreement on establishing the two mechanisms would free up time for preparing the ground carefully for the OEWG. One delegation, Iran, expressed the view that all elements of the WG mandate should be dealt with equally.

A number of procedural matters were the subject of considerable discussion. There were some calls for the OEWG to operate solely by consensus – in other words every decision or conclusion should be agreed by all. Others raised concerns that the rule of consensus was now being turned into a power of veto. It was notable that those few strongly expressing the need for consensus included those that have in recent years blocked consensus. The question of participation in the OEWG was raised many times with many expressions of desires to have a wide variety of expertise available in the room. This issue was raised during the informal consultations and the delegation that has been most vocal about questions of participation of observers in BWC meetings, that of Russia, highlighted that the non-governmental observers were still in the room and that they had produced more inputs on paper to WG6 than the delegations of states parties. Other delegations suggested there would be benefits of having non-governmental expertise being able to provide inputs other than on paper, such as joining in the interactive meetings. [Note: it has been the practice in these reports not to specify which non-plenary meetings observers have able to sit in as these are often on a case-by-case basis. Thus far in WG6, all of the informal consultations have been open to NGOs.]

A presentation on the estimated costs of running the OEWG was given by the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU). This indicated an initial estimate for an OEWG working for 20 days per year would be in the region of US\$600,000, not including any additional ISU staff time. It was emphasised that this was an initial estimate. [For comparison, this sum is equal to roughly 30 per cent of the current annual budget for the BWC.] Costings for verification activities themselves were not discussed as this would be premature; however, it was clear that the cost of verification measures would dwarf the proposed cost of the OEWG.

It was suggested that the work of the OEWG might overlap with the work of the S&T review mechanism. Many delegations are concerned about financial issues and so elimination of duplication where this might reduce expenditures is often a focal point of discussion. It was noted that the technical challenges of compliance and verification were going to be considerable and that the two bodies would be approaching these challenges in different ways. In particular, the OEWG would be policy-led and the larger body in the S&T mechanism would be likely to meet only for one day a year or so.

Views on the starting point for the OEWG (and/or any other compliance and verification discussions) followed previously expressed positions. A few delegations repeated suggestions of basing work on the outputs of VEREX and of the protocol negotiations in the AHG. Those that wanted to start with a clean sheet of paper accepted that there were important lessons to learn from those experiences. One aspect of past activities highlighted was practice visits/inspections and some interventions suggested that similar activities carried out now could provide useful contributions to the work of the OEWG. The capacity building aspects of trial visits was noted.

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Friday 22nd August 2025

WG6 discussions on national implementation and mechanism details

As with other topics discussed at the Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC), the topic of national implementation was discussed earlier than had been scheduled.

Discussions on this topic started on Tuesday afternoon and finished on Wednesday rather than being held at the end of the week. The Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), has moved on to the next scheduled topic rather than stick to a rigid programme of work.

Part of the time in the plenary room dedicated to national implementation was carried out as informal consultations moderated by the Friends of the Chair for this topic – Grisselle Rodríguez (Panama), Athikarn Dilogwathana (Thailand), Reski Ilahi (Indonesia), and Claudia Henfry (Australia). Informal consultations on the topic of organizational, institutional and financial arrangements were held on Wednesday afternoon moderated by one of the Friends of the Chair on that topic – Husham Ahmed (Pakistan). Wednesday afternoon also saw the circulation of a draft of the procedural report from WG6.

On Thursday, the Chair introduced some textual proposals to deal with remaining questions on details of the two proposed mechanisms.

Discussions on national implementation issues

National implementation is, by definition, a responsibility of each state party. This puts some limits on what the BWC as a whole can do in this issue area other than to encourage, enable and assist states parties in their national efforts, including sharing national experiences. National implementation was summarised as a holistic ongoing multi-sector process. There were reminders that biological threats exist to humans, animals and plants and that national implementation needs to be able to cover all of these. The Philippines suggested ‘budget allocation is the highest form of policy implementation’.

The need for coordination across government departments for BWC-relevant implementation was described as a ‘whole of government’ approach. The usefulness of national contact points (NCPs) to enable coordination within and between governments was noted. Moreover, any ability to network NCPs to encourage exchange of knowledge and experiences was seen as being beneficial.

Capacity constraints for both initiating effective national implementation and for keeping it under review were highlighted. Benefits of international cooperation through workshops and other training activities, including legislative assistance, were all the subject of shared understandings. While legislation is often the focus of national implementation discussions, the need for enforcement of legislative provisions was also highlighted.

While there was common ground on promotion of a culture of responsibility in science there were differences in emphasis between delegations. Some were keen on issues such as promotion of codes of conduct and methods for management of biological risks to be specifically referred to in the rolling text under national implementation while others thought this was not needed. A number of delegations emphasised promotion of peaceful uses of the life sciences as part of national implementation – both for promotion

nationally and internationally – while others indicated that Article X issues should be handled separately from national implementation issues.

The challenges of regulating materials and technologies that have peaceful uses but can also have hostile uses were discussed – this is the core of what are sometimes called ‘dual-use issues’. Previous positions on this were expressed about whether some implementation activities, particularly export controls, might be too restrictive.

The BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) gave a presentation on cost estimates for national and sub-regional implementation assistance workshops. This type of activity is currently funded from voluntary contributions. The ISU indicated that there would be benefits of having a core of activities funded by assessed contributions which would include improved advanced planning. During discussion there were many expressions of appreciation for the efforts of the ISU.

Discussions on details of the two mechanisms

The taking stock discussions on Friday of the first week had highlighted that the priority for many delegations was the adoption of the two proposed mechanisms – one on international cooperation and assistance (ICA) and the other to review scientific and technological (S&T) developments. On Thursday, the Chair introduced some new text for some of the remaining issues. No final conclusions were reached with some delegations indicating they wanted more time to consider the new proposals.

A new text was introduced on the composition of S&T Reporting Committee – the smaller body in that mechanism. This was based on the selection processes used for the Scientific Advisory Board under the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Scientific Advisory Group under the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. In each case, a senior official makes the selection, based on nominations from states parties followed by consultations. With no institution, the BWC has no equivalent official and the suggestion from the Chair was for the President of the five-yearly Review Conference (or a Special Conference) to undertake this role. This was positively received as a practical step forward although concerns were raised if this might be a burdensome addition to the role. No delegation spoke against the idea of organizing selection via the RevCon President. The most common duration suggested for membership was three years, renewable once. [Note: from the back of the room, it seemed that a two-and-a-half year appointment duration would keep things in sync with the five-yearly RevCon cycle. In a RevCon year, nominations could be received by the administrative Preparatory Committee in April, consulted upon in the margins of the substantive PrepCom in August, and decided upon in the run up to the RevCon to avoid getting encumbered by any politics within the RevCon itself. Decisions could include who would take office at the halfway point. However, discussions in the room did not get into this level of detail.]

A new text on the Steering Group within the ICA mechanism – the smaller body in that mechanism. The proposal was again to have the President of the Review Conference to make the selection. There was less discussion on this as the membership of this body would serve as delegates of their states parties rather than as independent members in the S&T mechanism.

The Chair suggested moving text on financial arrears by states parties for their assessed contributions from the ICA section to the section on organizational, institutional and financial arrangements. This was broadly accepted, but language on what to do about arrears remains under discussion.

The last text from the Chair was introduced as a ‘food for thought’ proposal on cost-sharing contributions. This remains the subject of strongly-held divergent views.

There will be an additional report covering the final day and closing of WG6 that will be circulated to subscribers and posted to the website below.

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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'.

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