

Sunday 30th August 2026

The final day of the penultimate session and some reflections

The Ninth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) completed its work on Friday 21 August. Much of the time was spent in informal small groups on the issue clusters. WG9 adopted a brief procedural report, based on equivalents from earlier sessions.

Although the Rev.5 version of the draft report from the WG had been circulated on the night before, a new version, Rev.6, was circulated on Friday morning. The BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) circulated Rev.7 on Thursday 27 August which has all of the WG9 edits. Copies of the revisions of the draft report are available on the official web page of the Ninth Session at <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/79378/>.

In a notable intervention, Ambassador Leonardo Bencini (Italy) took the floor on his last working day in Geneva. He was President of the Ninth Review Conference (2022) that established the WG and described the Conference as ‘a collective achievement ... against all odds, against a background which was certainly not very favourable.’ He added, ‘the main goal that we achieved at the time was to break a 21-year-old deadlock. We decided to strengthen the institutionalization of the Convention and we put on the agenda again the issue of verification and in order to do that, we created this Working Group.’ Noting ‘huge progress’ and highlighting the importance of the two mechanisms ‘because it is the first step towards creating a more solid institutional framework for our Convention which it doesn’t have at the moment’, he expressed optimism that agreement could be reached in December. ‘But I would like to also sound a note of caution and warning – we have to be very careful; it is a very delicate moment. ... I remain optimistic, but if we don’t find an agreement, the whole process risks imploding. And what I mean by imploding, I mean all the work that we have conducted over the past few years and even before might have been in vain and we will go back to square one, which is not 2022, but it is 2021, because we are not going to repeat what we have done here. So there is a lot at stake. I don’t want to be negative, I just want everyone to be aware.’

Substantive discussions

As with Thursday, much of the time on Friday was spent in informal small groups on the issue clusters. The idea was that these informal settings could be used to discuss proposals, which if they gathered consensus could be brought forward through the facilitators to plenary for agreement. Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), the Chair of the WG, expressed frustration that while the clusters were working well there were times when delegations were bringing proposals to plenary rather than have them discussed first in the relevant cluster – a less productive use of time.

Cluster 1 – Unilateral coercive measures (UCMs) [India/Norway] – Proposals from the facilitators moved the discussions forward. A paragraph on ‘restrictions and/or limitations’ on transfers was agreed and so green-highlighted after it was recast so that it recalled understandings reached by earlier Review Conferences. One of the sub-paragraphs to this was greened while the other remained unagreed.

Cluster 2 – Confidence-building measures (CBMs) [Peru] – The facilitator introduced text to try to balance proposals for CBM changes with proposals for voluntary

measures. At lunchtime, Iran and the USA asked for more time to consider the proposal, leading the Chair to comment: 'These meetings are funny because we can have agreement between USA and Iran'. An updated paragraph was agreed in the afternoon making this whole section now green-highlighted.

Cluster 3 – Compliance and verification [Netherlands] – The facilitator introduced new text for some of the remaining sub-paragraphs on what verification discussions might cover. The compromise drew from language in Article I of the Convention about prohibitions. Almost all of the sub-paragraphs are now in green.

Cluster 4 – ICA Trust Fund [Canada/South Africa] – Did not report anything specific on Friday, but indicated, as other facilitators had done, that they would continue consultations between now and WG10 in December.

Cluster 5 – Science and Technology [Pakistan] – The facilitator introduced text on the overarching paragraph relating to topics to be discussed by Review Group allowing this paragraph to be green-highlighted. New language for three paragraphs on the composition of the Reporting Committee were put forward. This included provisions for replacements appointed when there are mid-session vacancies in the Committee which included a reference to the states parties meeting 'informally' to decide on the replacement in order not to incur costs for a formal meeting. These were also agreed.

Some reflections on the Ninth Session of the Working Group

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

There is not much time left before the mandate of the WG comes to an end. While there will be time for some informal consultations before the Tenth Session convenes in December, there are only five working days left before the WG mandate expires. Even though the vast majority of text is now green-highlighted (the ISU's calculation is 93.5 per cent in green and yellow), this is a tight schedule. Yet it must not be forgotten that final compromises only occur when the schedule is very tight. There have been numerous cases where many issues have been resolved when deadlines loom. Equally, there have been cases where negotiations failed because there was too much to do in too little time in the final days. As Ambassador Bencini noted, there is a lot at stake.

The consequences of a 'failure' of WG9 need to be considered carefully. It is hard to see what could come out of the Tenth Review Conference (2027) as many states parties would not wish to allocate four more years of resources to any process that might not be productive. There already murmurings (from individual delegates rather than delegations as a whole) of whether a different forum might be better used to strengthen global efforts to control biological weapons. The 1925 Geneva Protocol (which bans use of biological weapons) would be an obvious choice as issues around investigation of alleged uses and science advice that might facilitate such investigations would fall within its remit. There is no equivalent to BWC Article X in the Geneva Protocol and so the question of balancing details of two mechanisms would not arise.

The tone of WG9 has been dictated in part by its position in the timeline. Gone are conceptual discussions in earlier sessions on the role of science advice or the impact of enhanced international cooperation and assistance; these have been replaced by much more legalistic discussions of formulating text. It might be productive to remind delegates in the run-up to WG10 of some of the concepts underpinning the work of the WG.

Meeting in the Assembly Hall, the largest conference room in the Palais des Nations, came with challenges owing to the physical size of the room. However, the availability of a number of small meeting rooms one floor below made the cluster process more effective than it would have been in recent WG sessions held in the Tempus building – a temporary structure used while other conference rooms are being refurbished.

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>.