

Tuesday 29th November 2022

The opening of the Review Conference and the start of the general debate

The Ninth five-yearly Review Conference for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) met in Salle XIX of the Palais des Nations, one of the more modern conference rooms which allows for proceedings to be viewed on the UN Web TV service. The official BWC website for the Review Conference can be found at <https://meetings.unoda.org/bwc-revcon/biological-weapons-convention-ninth-review-conference-2022> which includes links to official documents and to other information.

The opening of the Conference

The Conference was opened by Izumi Nakamitsu, the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs who oversaw the election of Ambassador Leonardo Bencini (Italy) as President. On taking his place on the podium, the President thanked the Conference for expressing confidence in him and noted that the Review Conference was one year late because of the pandemic, but that the effects of the pandemic had also meant that the preparation time for this Review Conference was much shorter than usual. He noted that there were numerous working papers tabled, many containing concrete proposals that were well developed and were ripe for action rather than continued consideration.

The opening formalities were fairly brief, with the usual steps such as the adoption of the agenda and decisions on participation of observer states and international bodies, etc. The rules of procedure were adopted as adjusted to follow past practice which includes that Committees may decide to hold certain meetings in public. The President noted the attendance of national experts from developing countries supported through the sponsorship programme operated by the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) and thanked those who financially supported the programme.

The meeting moved on to the appointment of office holders within the Conference. Russia took the floor to highlight that their nominations to positions had been blocked within the Eastern European Group (EEG) by one, unnamed, member of the Group. Russia had therefore decided to withdraw from the EEG and establish a 'one state group', claiming that this new group would have equivalent status to the other regional groups. Nevertheless, all Conference positions were allocated via the three long-standing regional groups. Tatiana Molcean (Moldova) was confirmed as Chair of the Committee of the Whole and Sarah Lindegren (Sweden) as Chair of the Drafting Committee. The Chair of the Credentials Committee is to be an unnamed member of the delegation of South Africa. Other positions agreed included Vice-Presidents of the Conference and Vice Chairs of the Committees, but not all positions were filled as the regional groups had not completed their internal nomination processes and so this agenda item would remain open. The appointed facilitators remain as listed in the first of this series of daily reports.

In introducing the indicative programme of work, published on the Conference website, the President noted he would be inviting the four Chairs of the Meetings of States Parties (MSPs) held each year from 2017 through 2020 to address a plenary session. He also indicated he wished to hold as many meetings in public as possible. [*Historical note:* the meetings of the Committee of the Whole during the Eighth Review Conference (2016) were in public for the first reading of the article-by-article review and remained so for

most of the second reading before moving into private session. They were entirely in public during the Seventh Review Conference (2011). The Drafting Committee has not been convened since the Fifth Review Conference (2001 & 2002) and it is not clear from the records available to this author whether those meetings were public or private.]

Substantive discussions

The substantive discussions started with a brief video address from UN Secretary-General (UNSG) António Guterres who noted that when the BWC was negotiated the global community came together to declare that the deliberate use of disease as a weapon was an affront to humanity. He urged considerations of three specific actions: to ‘give teeth’ to the BWC’s ‘accountability provisions’ to ensure that scientific advances are not exploited for hostile purposes; to ‘update our thinking on verification and compliance to fit today’s threats’; and to provide the increased financial and human resources the BWC needs to carry out this important work.

High Representative Izumi Nakamitsu then addressed the Conference. She suggested that no topic should be off the table in the quest to strengthen the BWC. She focused on four steps which addressed the UNSG’s three actions in a slightly different formulation in which she spoke of the need to ‘operationalize’ and ‘institutionalize’ the BWC, providing it with appropriate resources and exploring verifying compliance.

The exchanges of views in the general debate – the opportunity for delegations to outline their positions in public statements – started with ‘high-level statements’ (those made by visiting dignitaries above the rank of ambassador rank), statements on behalf of groups of states and then national statements. Where copies of statements have been provided by those who delivered them, the ISU will place these on the Conference website. High-level statements were given by Italy, Kazakhstan and Serbia. Group statements were given by Azerbaijan (for the non-aligned group of BWC states parties), the European Union, Belarus (for the Collective Security Treaty Organization [CSTO]), Germany (for the Global Partnership), Russia (for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization [SCO]), Cambodia (for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN]), Russia (for the Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS]) and Estonia (for the Baltic states). National statements were given by Russia, Colombia, Finland, Uruguay, France, India, Pakistan, Lao PDR, Republic of Korea, Moldova, Georgia, Japan, Nepal, China, Czechia, Philippines, Kuwait, Iraq, Germany Dominican Republic, Netherlands, Australia, Singapore, Mongolia, Indonesia, Chile, Canada, Timor Leste, New Zealand, Nigeria, Switzerland, Türkiye, Sweden, Austria and Algeria. Rights of reply statements were given by Moldova, Russia and Georgia.

With the general debate to continue well into Tuesday it is too early to identify many themes or common threads. One notable development is the prominence given to gender issues which, by comparison, were hardly mentioned at the last Review Conference. As might be expected in light of the geo-political situation, the Ukraine situation was often referred to with many statements describing the Russian allegations about biological research in Ukraine as being groundless. Russia raised numerous points of order claiming that discussion of the invasion of Ukraine was outside the scope of the BWC and used its rights of reply to suggest that only Western states were describing its allegations as groundless. Moldova used its right of reply to clarify it does not take part in political and military meetings of the CIS and so was not party to that group statement.

Side events

There were five side events on Monday – one at breakfast, two at lunchtime and two in the evening. Details are given on the Conference website. As the Review Conference progresses, there will hopefully be more space to report on the side events in these reports.

This is the second report from the Ninth BWC Review Conference (28 November-16 December 2022). These have been produced for all BWC meetings with NGO registration since the Sixth Review Conference (2006) by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). They are available from <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>> and <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>>. A subscription link is available on each webpage. Financial support for these reports has been gratefully received from Global Affairs Canada. The reports are written by Richard Guthrie, CBW Events, who is solely responsible for their contents <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.