

CWC Review Conference Report

The Committee of the Whole and additional informal consultations

The third day of the Fifth Review Conference for the Chemical Weapons Convention saw a morning plenary session on operation of the CWC before moving to meetings held behind closed doors. At the end of the morning, the Committee of the Whole (CoW) was convened for the first time and adjourned shortly after. Much of the afternoon was taken up with informal consultations/facilitations with the Friends of the Chair and within the informal group for the preparation of the report being steered by the Chair of the CoW, Ambassador José Antonio Zabalgaitia (Mexico). The CoW met during the evening and then, after a break, into the night. While the plenary sessions are open to everyone registered for the Review Conference, the informal meetings and the CoW are only accessible to delegates from states parties.

The morning plenary

The plenary session on Wednesday morning was focused on the agenda item dealing with the operation of the CWC which has a number of subtopics.

The session started with the Chair of the Scientific Advisory Board introducing its report to the Review Conference which included 45 recommendations clustered within a number of themes which included advice on technology convergence and advice on science and technology relevant to verification, for example.

Destruction issues – the US provided an update to its destruction activities which it indicated were on schedule to be completed before 30 September. The country provides a written report prior to each Review Conference which is a snapshot on progress and more up to date information is now available via the destruction agency websites. Japan provided a briefing on activities to destroy chemical weapons abandoned in China during the Second World War and highlighted that considerable resources were allocated to the task. China argued that there had been a lack of attention by Japan on this issue and expressed frustration that the task was still not complete 26 years after the CWC had entered into force. Both noted that the Executive Council had agreed to a new destruction plan at its 101st session. Germany noted that chemical munitions from the two world wars were still being found from time to time.

Universality – A number of points were raised in discussion under this sub-item. The near-universal membership of the CWC was commended but there was recognition that more that could be done to bring the remaining four countries into membership of the Convention – the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Israel and South Sudan. It was highlighted that two of these countries had sent delegations to the Review Conference and that this might be taken as a positive sign. Interventions noted that the existence of any country outside of the Convention that might be capable of possessing chemical weapons would constitute a potential threat to the CWC. Israel has signed but not ratified the Convention and a question was raised as to whether it was appropriate for a country to remain in this status for so long.

Enhancing international cooperation and assistance – This sub-item included discussion on issues relating to CWC Article X on assistance and protection against chemical threats and Article XI on cooperation and assistance for peaceful uses. As with other treaties controlling weapons of mass destruction, there is a balance between measures to prohibit hostile activities and those to promote peaceful purposes. There were claims that economic sanctions were in breach of these CWC provisions. Ukraine

expressed appreciation for the Article X assistance it had received and noted there were toxic challenges in that country from residues of conventional explosives in the ongoing military action. The recent inauguration of the ChemTech Centre was commented on by a number of delegations which welcomed the opportunities the new Centre would bring. Canada outlined some of the capacity-building activities carried out by the 31 members of the Global Partnership. Yemen noted the value of exchanges of good practices.

Staffing issues – while there was a specific sub-item on organizational governance that included staffing issues for the Technical Secretariat, there were a points raised under other sub-items that are more convenient to report together. The use of non-permanent personnel for inspections, known as Special Service Agreement (SSA) posts, was suggested to be not optimum. There were references to the need for training for staff although the costs of recruitment, training and knowledge management when staff cannot be retained were not explored. It was suggested that the OPCW could join the UN Joint Staff Pension Fund. There were indications that a working group on some of the staffing issues might be a way forward.

Malaysia introduced a paper with 59 state party sponsors on gender equality, diversity and the CWC, indicating that use of chemical weapons may impact men, women and children differently and that this warrants further attention. Benefits of diversity within decision-making were highlighted and implications of the under-representation of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) noted.

Informal meetings and the Committee of the Whole

Once the plenary had finished in the morning, there was a short meeting of the CoW before breaking for lunch. During the afternoon there were a variety of small meetings in side rooms, some focused on particular issues, some looking at broader questions. While the four topics of the previously announced Friends of the Chair were still being discussed, additional informal facilitations were taking place on issues such as counter-terrorism and engagement with outside bodies. Some of these were taking place in parallel which was difficult for small delegations (and for observers outside) to keep track. There was greater progress on a number of these issues than a number of delegates had earlier felt likely.

The CoW convened in the evening and met for roughly three hours before taking a break to return at 23:00 in order to try to have a text to deliver to a plenary session on Thursday.

At the time of the CoW taking its break, the industry verification and NGO attendance issues seemed to have workable solutions, at least in terms of what could be put into a Review Conference report. Issues around geographical representation in the staffing of the Technical Secretariat under organisational governance also seemed to getting resolved but there was some slightly contradictory information on this so there might be some outstanding challenges. There were also informal consultations on how matters relating to Syria should appear in the report of the meeting – perhaps the most challenging of all of the subjects under consideration.

With only five working days, this Review Conference is the shortest that there has been for this Convention. This has significantly compressed the time available for making any attempts to reach a consensus outcome. There are some positive benefits to this as negotiations are subject to ‘Parkinson’s Law’ – work expands to fill the time available. This means that a shorter negotiating time can help focus minds. However, some of the issues being dealt with are complex and it is possible that capitals will struggle to keep up with delegations – a practical reason to have a text on Thursday to give time for capitals to consider it.

This is the fourth report from the Fifth Review Conference for the Chemical Weapons Convention being held in The Hague from 15 to 19 May 2023. These reports are written by Richard Guthrie of CBW Events who is solely responsible for their contents. The reports are available via <http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/cwc-rep.html> which includes a subscription link to receive the reports via email. The author can be contacted via richard@cbw-events.org.uk.