

Proceedings of Biological Weapons Convention Working Group Meetings- 2023: A Snapshot

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Summary

The article provides an overview of recent proceedings within the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) working group meetings as of December 2023. Deliberations focused on compliance, verification mechanisms, and confidence-building measures to prevent the proliferation of biological weapons. While achievements such as reaffirmed commitments and agreements on cooperation were notable, challenges persist, particularly regarding the establishment of robust verification protocols. The Meeting of States Parties (MSP) reports offer detailed insights into the discussions and diverse international perspectives. The outcomes underscore both progress and complexities in global efforts to strengthen the BWC framework against biological weapons, emphasizing the need for continued cooperation and dialogue.

Introduction

The Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) stands as a cornerstone in international efforts to prevent the development, production, and use of biological weapons. However, the Convention's effectiveness has been limited due to insufficient institutional support and the absence of any formal verification regime to monitor compliance. The recent deliberations, as of December 2023, within the BWC working group meetings have shed light on critical issues and potential pathways forward.

Background

The end of the Cold War led to renewed negotiations for drafting the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) along with the negotiations to include a verification mechanism to the BWC. A Group of Experts created a list of verification mechanisms from a scientific and technical standpoint during the Third Review Conference of the BWC in 1991. Over the course of four meetings, the Group created a set of 21 verification measures and presented them to a Special Conference of BWC State Parties in 1994. As a direct result of the work done by VEREX as well as the CWC being completed and being opened for signatures in 1993, an ad hoc group was created to negotiate a draft of an updated BWC.

Genesis of the BWC Working Group

Over the decades, the global initiatives such as the Ad Hoc Group Recommendations or the Draft Verification Protocol of 2001, aimed at averting the intentional deployment of biological pathogens, seemed to be losing momentum due to lack of consensus.

However, in view of the growing biological threats due to dual use emerging technologies, the suggestion made during the 2021 BWC Meeting of States Parties that the 9th BWC Review Conference (BWC RevCon) “should establish a new expert working group to examine possible measures to strengthen implementation of the Convention, increase transparency, and enhance assurance of compliance”¹ paved the way to refresh the discussions on Verification Protocol. One of the most prominent achievements of the 9th BWC RevCon was the successful establishment of the Working Group for strengthening the Convention.

In the most recent working group meetings leading up to December 2023, participating nations engaged in extensive discussions surrounding compliance, verification mechanisms, and confidence-building measures. The three-day sessions provided a platform for open dialogue on the challenges and opportunities associated with biological weapons prevention.

Working Group (WG) discussions

The WG discussions included panel discussions and working papers by State parties on various topics,

The Working Group (WG) discussions broadly included three topics:

1. Compliance and verification
2. Other international bodies with verification arrangements
3. Scientific and technical issues related to verification

The WG discussions held at the early conceptual level included healthy discussions amongst the State parties involving a variety

of perspectives regarding the purpose and definitions of Compliance and Verification, Conceptual Scope, and Verification Elements. Though the lessons from other verification regimes would be insightful, the discussions regarding the peculiar nature of biological threat involving living organisms emphasized the need to appreciate its distinctive nature. The unique challenges associated with handling living organisms were emphasized, pointing out that biological controls necessitate distinct characteristics compared to their counterparts in chemical or nuclear contexts. Consequently, it was deemed impractical to simply transfer measures from other regimes through a ‘cut and paste’ approach. Detailed discussions for the roadmap of WG involved drawing some elements the historical lessons included those from the VEREX process and Ad Hoc Group recommendations.² Rapid scientific advancements in life sciences and the recent Covid-19 pandemic inspired the discussions around the need to incorporate the Contextual Changes required. The discussions also included a variety of views on the legally binding measures, also highlighting the risk of them being perceived as binary option as legally binding or non-binding. It was widely acknowledged that a subject that had proved challenging to address over the course of two decades, could only achieve limited progress in the span of three days.

A separate Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC), was devoted to the topic, ‘Measures on organizational, institutional and financial arrangements’, including a presentation by the Implementation Support Unit (ISU), substantive discussions and other routine BWC matters, along with wide support for the ISU and the need to make it a permanent structure.

Achievements

During these meetings, several notable achievements were observed. Participating nations reaffirmed their commitment to the principles of the BWC and acknowledged the importance of transparency in preventing the proliferation of biological weapons. Agreements on specific measures to enhance international cooperation and information exchange were among the positive outcomes.

BWC MSP Reports

The Meeting of States Parties (MSP) Reports from the BWC further underscored the discussions held during the working group meetings. These Reports provide a detailed account of the proceedings, highlighting the nuanced positions of different nations and offering insights into the challenges faced in advancing the goals of the Convention.

Lost Opportunities

Despite the achievements, certain areas revealed missed opportunities for more comprehensive agreements. Some nations expressed reservations, resulting in a lack of a unified approach in certain areas such as programme of work and the rules of procedure of the MSP.

International Perspectives

International perspectives on the outcomes of the meetings were diverse. While some nations praised the progress made, others called for more ambitious measures to address emerging threats. The diversity of opinions reflected the complex nature of negotiations within the BWC framework and emphasized the need for continued diplomatic efforts. There were apprehensions about the potential establishment of risky precedents during these proceedings. A total of 49 working papers were presented to the MSP, with many being duplicates of statements that

delegations had planned to deliver during the general debate. The approval of the Report was somewhat unclear, as a technical amendment was accepted immediately after it had been officially forced through.

Future Implications

The welcome beginning and the outcomes of the working group meetings hold significant implications for the future of the Biological Weapons Convention. The healthy discussions and positive strides signal a collective commitment to strengthening the global framework against biological weapons. However, challenges remain, and addressing them will require sustained international cooperation and dialogue.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the proceedings of the Biological Weapons Convention Working Group meetings reflect both progress and challenges in the global effort to prevent the proliferation of biological weapons. The achievements underscore the commitment of nations to the principles of the BWC, while the troubled past and missed opportunities highlight the complexities of navigating international consensus. As the world continues to grapple with evolving security threats, the importance of ongoing discussions and diplomatic efforts within the BWC cannot be overstated.

References:

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