

Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction

UNITED NATIONS INFORMATION SERVICE
4 August 2000
GENEVA

HIGHLIGHTS OF PRESS CONFERENCE BY TIBOR TOTH, CHAIRMAN OF THE AD HOC GROUP OF STATES PARTIES TO THE BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS CONVENTION, HELD AT THE PALAIS DES NATIONS ON 4 AUGUST 2000

Ambassador Tibor Toth of Hungary, Chairman of the Ad Hoc Group of States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) Weapons and Toxin Weapons and Their Destruction, said this had been the twentieth session of the Ad Hoc Group of a four-week duration. There was a certain degree of continuity in the work. Yet there were features which were totally new. The new features were, compared to previous sessions, less work in a formal format, and more 'give-and-take' type of discussion in informal consultations. The problems faced were the narrowing down of the numbers of existing options in the text and the scope of the protocol. As a result, delegations were able to visualize for themselves the potential concessions which would have to be made in the end game. Some of the concessions would be difficult for different sides. Based on the present official positions on important issues, they could foresee steps which should be made to arrive at a compromise. Good progress had been made in certain areas such as the areas of investigations, cooperation and promotional aspects of cooperation. There had been good progress in cleaning the rolling text on issues such as the lists of agents, equipment and definitions. There had been less progress within compliance measures, which were core and important elements for the future protocol. This discussion was still not leading to massive removals of the remaining brackets in the text. At the same time, especially on the declaration formats, an important part of future measures, there had been important consolidation of the existing text. The rolling text is moving away from two or three alternatives and is consolidating. Summing up, the Chairman felt that as a result of the two informal meetings yesterday and Monday morning, the delegations were more willing to engage in a course of 'give-and-take' but the road ahead would be bumpy because of the nature of further compromises required.

When asked if the target date of 2001 was reasonable, Mr. Toth said that in calendar months it was practically more than a year away as the next review conference would probably take place in November-December 2001. The three depositaries of the Convention, the United States, the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation, had announced their plans to this effect. The Group had to finish its work prior to that date. It was perhaps misleading to speak about more than a year as they might have a couple of weeks of concrete work in this period of time. In November and December, there would be a three-week session and in 2001 there might not be more than two, maximum, three sessions, each of them averaging three weeks. It was a race with time, but they were

moving ahead. It was difficult to foresee how the delegations would move forward in trying to breach the existing differences.

Asked to elaborate on what exactly had happened in terms of bumpy issues and to spell out the progress on the investigation and technical cooperation, Mr. Toth said that the critical issues were in the areas of compliance measures. There were still questions as to what kind of coverage should be there for the declarations, which portion of industrial facilities and which portion of bio defense facilities would have to be declared. There was also the question of visits and what kind of visits should take place? There were delegations who gave more emphasis to so-called random routine visits, and some who wanted, in addition to that, clarification visits. The question on whether a clarification visit should be totally voluntary or whether it might be initiated by others remained. There were questions on transfers, export control and about what kind of arrangements one could or should foresee in a multilateral framework on regulating export and import activities and what the relationship should be between these arrangements vis-a-vis existing national arrangements. Many developing countries wanted to see the strengthening of the set of multilateral arrangements and some of the industrialized countries wanted to preserve the decision on export control as a national prerogative and to make the judgement on the basis of national decision-making process. In the area of cooperation, there had been a significant level of removal of brackets from the text. This cooperation was significant, particularly in issues such as assisting States parties to fulfil their obligations and in the area of prevention, management and control of diseases. In the area of assisting States parties to strengthen their public health systems, there were concrete measures emerging.

Mr. Toth said he would like to point the attention of the press to other developments as well. There was a request to Switzerland and to the Netherlands to submit their responses as countries bidding for hosting the seat of the organization. Expectation was that they would provide their responses to a questionnaire which contained all the questions. These countries might wish to submit those responses by the middle of November by which time there would be more clarity about who was putting which emphasis on which points in terms of the bidding.

The Group had enjoyed the attention from the G-8 Foreign Ministers and G-8 Communique where there had been an important reference to the need to conclude all work as soon as possible in 2001. In comparison to earlier statements, this was a stronger emphasis on the need to complete the work. This message came as a consensus understanding among the G-8 countries, which was important for the work of the Group.

A correspondent asked about the issue of investigation and whether there had been progress on the core issues, such as the period of prior notice and the scope of investigations. On the issue of cooperation, were the developed nations willing to enlarge the scope of cooperation? Mr. Toth explained that in all the investigations, there was the complicated question of how to provide access to sensitive facilities. These could be facilities which in the perception of the receiving country had nothing to do with weapons-related activities, but might be nuclear facilities. It was difficult to know how to

handle the arrival of inspectors, requiring access to an installation. A balance had to be found where the inspectors were not trying to go beyond the scope of the arrangements and countries had a possibility to safeguard their national security related information.

Regarding the time line on investigations, there was a discussion about how long the time should be between the approval of an investigation and between arrival. On the issue of technology transfer, this area was different from other areas such as the Chemical Weapons Convention due to the diseases. The strengthened cooperation in terms of facing diseases was not like handing out gifts to developing countries. These diseases posed a transboundary challenge to both developing and developed countries. The industrialized countries recognized that it was in their best interest to address potential problems like the emergence of diseases. A good example of this was the security benefits of the future protocol, to prevent deliberate disease, that is, the man-made disease. Natural occurrence of diseases was one of ten major outbreaks per month according to WHO statistics. In the final analysis, it makes no distinction whether it was a man-made or naturally occurring disease. Because of migratory movements, tourism and other factors there is a public health emergency. Another cooperation element is the strengthening of the public health infrastructure in developing countries, such as the cooperation in vaccines and training. The intention was not to set up a second WHO but to have an organization which could deal with the man-made disease threat. Through training, education and assistance, it could provide useful cooperation elements.

With regard to the compromises and concessions, many of the concessions could not be affiliated with certain groups. There was no clear-cut delineation. There was a set of compromises expected by the Western Group and a set of compromises expected by the developing countries. The issue of visits was a cross group type of division, between countries wanting to have stricter visits and others who wanted more emphasis on preserving confidentiality elements during a visit. Concerning transparent export control, there was a more significant gap between positions and the division was formed more on a group basis.

When asked about the number of ratifications, Mr. Toth said there was a broad range of numbers starting from 45 to 75. It was also being discussed whether the three depositaries should be among those whose ratification was a prerequisite. This debate so far was inconclusive.

A correspondent asked about notification of problems of abuses, and Mr. Toth said there was a complaint procedure and a set of provisions in the protocol which would handle clarification, consultation and cooperation. There was a well-established mechanism on how to put forward certain requests for clarification and the time period within which there should be a reaction.

The next session would start on the 20th of November and would last for three weeks. A week prior to that, Mr. Toth said he would undertake very intensive informal consultations. More work would be added behind the scenes as time becomes a rare commodity. Mr. Toth said he was encouraged to see as a result of this interaction that

there was a possibility to identify important building blocks for the final version of the protocol.