

Wednesday 3rd December 2008

The Second Day: Start of Closed Sessions

The 2008 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) reconvened on Tuesday morning to hear one presentation in public before moving on to the agenda item 'Consideration of national, regional and international measures to improve biosafety and biosecurity, including laboratory safety and security of pathogens and toxins', discussion of which was held in private.

The movement into closed session is in marked contrast to the openness of the Meeting of Experts in August during which all sessions had been held in public. Many delegates had not even noticed that the NGOs had been excluded from the room given the uncontroversial nature of what was under discussion. There is a certain irony that a session related to transparency in setting biosecurity standards should be held behind closed doors!

The numbers of participants in this meeting is visibly reduced from that of the equivalent meeting in 2007 and the Meeting of Experts earlier this year. Key reasons for this would appear to be the clash in scheduling of this MSP not only with the signing of the cluster bombs treaty in Oslo but also with the annual Conference of the States Parties (CSP) of the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention in The Hague. A number of delegates are travelling between the these (therefore participants lists for each event may have an inflated appearance through individuals being registered for more than one). Consultations being held in the margins of both the MSP and CSP on possible dates for next year indicate a desire to prevent this clash in 2009.

In Washington, DC, a Congressionally mandated commission of inquiry in the United States published its report on proliferation issues.

Interpol Presentation

The public presentation was from Interpol and was given by Lisa Garin-Michaud of its Bioterrorism Prevention Programme which is funded by the Alfred P Sloan Foundation until 2011 with additional support from the Canadian and US governments and from private entities such as Microsoft. Interpol noted that the launch conference for this programme in 2005 had been attended by police from more countries than any of its other events. Regional workshops and training sessions have been held. For example, during 2007, training events were held in Kenya, Romania, the Philippines, Peru and Egypt. Table top exercises have been held in France in December 2007 and in Malaysia in August 2008.

Biosafety and biosecurity discussions

The morning session on this topic had been scheduled for discussion of the theme 'concepts and approaches' with the afternoon reserved for the themes of 'building capacity' and 'risk management'. As it turned out, the afternoon session was cancelled as only one State Party, the United States, had asked for the floor and so this country will speak on the topic on Wednesday morning.

Much discussion was on definitions and standards for biosafety and biosecurity with references to standards set by other bodies, such as the World Health Organization. An example of regional cooperation on these subjects was given in a description of the Regional Seminar on Implementing Biosafety and Biosecurity Management, organized by Indonesia and Norway, that was held in Jakarta in June. It was suggested that a common understanding amongst States Parties of the meanings of biosafety and biosecurity in the context of the BWC would not amount to a 'one size fits all' approach.

Side Events

Tuesday saw two side events. The first was an early-morning rendition in French of the VERTIC presentation on 'National Implementation Measures for the BWC' that had been given in English on Monday.

The second was a lunchtime seminar on Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) hosted by the Geneva Forum entitled 'Preparing the Ground for the CBM Content Debate: What Information Builds Confidence?' that took its name from a project of the BIOS Centre at the London School of Economics (LSE) sponsored by the Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs. Presenters were: Richard Lenanne from the Implementation Support Unit who provided an overview of the role of the ISU in relation to CBMs; Filippa Lentzos from LSE who addressed the quality of current CBM information; and Reto Wollenmann from Switzerland, speaking on behalf of Ambassador Jurg Streuli, who outlined a longer-term perspective on CBMs. Details of the BIOS Centre project can be found at http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/BIOS/biosecurity/projects/building_confidence.htm

'World at Risk' report

The US Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism published its report on Tuesday, entitled 'World at Risk'. It is not clear on what evidence the Commission based some of its conclusions about levels of threat. The report contains two biological-specific recommendations:

RECOMMENDATION 1: The United States should undertake a series of mutually reinforcing domestic measures to prevent bioterrorism: (1) conduct a comprehensive review of the domestic program to secure dangerous pathogens, (2) develop a national strategy for advancing bioforensic capabilities, (3) tighten government oversight of high-containment laboratories, (4) promote a culture of security awareness in the life sciences community, and (5) enhance the nation's capabilities for rapid response to prevent biological attacks from inflicting mass casualties.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The United States should undertake a series of mutually reinforcing measures at the international level to prevent biological weapons proliferation and terrorism: (1) press for an international conference of countries with major biotechnology industries to promote biosecurity, (2) conduct a global assessment of biosecurity risks, (3) strengthen global disease surveillance networks, and (4) propose a new action plan for achieving universal adherence to and effective national implementation of the Biological Weapons Convention, for adoption at the next review conference in 2011.

The report can be downloaded from <http://www.preventwmd.gov/report/>.

This is the third report from the Meeting of States Parties for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 1 to 5 December 2008 in Geneva. The reports are designed to help people who are not in Geneva to follow the proceedings.

The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) in co-operation with the Verification Research, Training and Information Centre (VERTIC). Copies are available via <http://www.bwpp.org/2008MSP/MSP2008Resources.html>.

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