

Monday 9th December 2013

The 2013 Meeting of States Parties: setting the scene

The opening of the 2013 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) is the halfway point of four years of meetings in the third inter-sessional process for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC). The MSP was preceded by a one-week Meeting of Experts (MX) that was held in August. The third inter-sessional process was agreed at the Seventh BWC Review Conference that was held in December 2011. The inter-sessional process meetings are intended to be practical and focused on promoting ideas and learning from experiences in order to develop common understandings and effective actions. The 2013 meetings are chaired by Judit Körömi of Hungary, the Special Representative of the Foreign Minister for Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, with two Vice-Chairs – Ambassador Mazlan Muhammad of Malaysia and Ambassador Urs Schmid of Switzerland.

Topics under discussion during the 2013 meetings

There are three on-going topics, also known as the standing agenda items, of the third inter-sessional process are ‘Cooperation and assistance, with a particular focus on strengthening cooperation and assistance under Article X’, ‘Review of developments in the field of science and technology related to the Convention’, and ‘Strengthening national implementation’. This year the meetings will also discuss ‘How to enable fuller participation in the CBMs’, the same theme that was under discussion in 2012.

BWC Article X embodies a bargain in which the renunciation of biological weapons and the control of the hostile uses of the life sciences have to be implemented in such a way as not to hinder the use of the life sciences for peaceful purposes. Cooperation and assistance goes further than Article X and includes other aspects such as capacity building. The changing science and technology context, and in particular the rapid advances in the life sciences, leads to changes in the nature of risks and threats the regime may need to counter, as well as providing new opportunities for peaceful uses. Improved national implementation of the provisions of the BWC has long been seen as an important way of enhancing effectiveness of the overall regime to control biological weapons. The system of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) under the Convention provides for information to be submitted by States Parties on certain relevant activities and facilities.

Preparations for the MSP

A number of papers from States Parties, together with the Chair’s Synthesis Paper (summarizing ideas raised at the MX) and the report of the MX, have been circulated as formal documents prior to the opening of the MSP. The Working Papers circulated thus far are: WP.1 Confidence-building measures: time to redouble efforts for effective action (USA); and WP.2 Strengthening Article VII: international cooperation and assistance in preparing for and responding to biological incidents (USA). An information paper from Canada on its activities under Article X has also been circulated (INF.2). Advance versions of papers yet to be released as formal documents include Getting Past Yes: Moving From Consensus Text to Effective Action (Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Netherlands, UK, and USA); Step by

Step Approach in CBMs participation (Australia, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Switzerland); Assistance and Cooperation (Art. X) (EU); Confidence-Building Measures: Taking discussions on enabling fuller participation forward to the Eighth Review Conference (Switzerland); Establishing a dedicated structure for the review of developments in biological science and technology (Switzerland); The Global Partnership Biosecurity Sub-Working Group in 2013: report of meetings held under the UK presidency (UK); and Strengthening National Implementation (USA). The advance release of papers allows for their contents to be considered before start of the MSP.

The Implementation Support Unit (ISU) annual report has been published which includes details of national contact points and CBM participation. As of 1 November, 57 States Parties had provided CBM returns this year, compared with 66 returns for 2012 as of 7 November 2012. Of the submitted CBMs in 2013, 21 have been made public at the request of the submitting States Parties. Also circulated prior to the MSP is the annual report on activities to promote universality. Four countries joined Convention between the 2012 MSP and the 2013 MX – Cameroon (18 January), Nauru (5 March), Guyana (26 March) and Malawi (2 April) – bringing the total number of States Parties to 170. However, there has been no further increase in membership since then.

All these papers can be found via the ISU website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>; official documents can also be found via the UN documents server <<http://documents.un.org>> (reference numbers for official documents for this meeting all start BWC/MSP/2013/). Additional papers are likely to be issued during the MSP.

Global Context

External political issues that have impinged on the BWC this year. The use of chemical weapons in the East Ghouta area of Damascus on 21 August – during the week following the MX – and the subsequent international reaction has had a significant knock-on impact. The Geneva Framework Agreement negotiated by Russia and the United States and enacted through decisions of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the United Nations Security Council has created an unprecedented and challenging operation to remove and destroy Syria's chemical weapons capabilities. As, in many countries, there is considerable overlap in the departments and officials dealing with biological and chemical weapons this has inevitably led to reduced attention to the BWC. The use of the United Nations Secretary-General's investigation mechanism for the investigation into alleged use of chemical weapons in March and then August may result in some BWC-relevant lessons learned. This mechanism has been discussed many times at BWC meetings as a possible method of investigating alleged use of biological weapons. Another issue is the frustration in some circles that the proposed 2012 meeting to discuss possibilities for a Middle East Zone Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction has still to be convened.

About these reports

Starting from the Sixth Review Conference in 2006, the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) has produced daily reports from each of the BWC meetings. The reports were initially designed to help people who were not in Geneva to follow the proceedings but are now also widely circulated each morning amongst delegates. Six reports will be produced during this MSP, starting with this setting the scene report. A report will be produced covering each day's activities, the last of which will be circulated electronically after the MSP has concluded. If you would like to be added to the mailing list please contact the author via the details given at the bottom of this page. The BWPP daily reports are available via the BWPP website at <<http://www.bwpp.org>>.

This is the first report from the Meeting of States Parties for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 9 to 13 December 2012 in Geneva.

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