

Wednesday 18th July 2012

The 2012 Meeting of Experts: the second day

The 2012 Meeting of Experts (MX) of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) continued on Tuesday. As with other days, where copies of statements or presentations have been provided by those who delivered them, the ISU will place these on its website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>.

Science and Technology developments

The morning session was on 'Review of developments in the field of science and technology related to the Convention' and was chaired by Vice-Chair Cezary Lusinski of Poland. Prepared statements/presentations were given by: the European Union (from the international organizations seat), Cuba (for the non-aligned), Iran, Sweden, Germany, Netherlands, Spain, France, Poland, China, Chile, USA, India, Italy and Mexico. During the morning, there were intervals when the prepared presentations were paused to allow discussion. Contributors to this discussion that did not have a prepared intervention included: Pakistan, UK, Colombia and Australia. The session concluded with the first 'guest of the meeting' presentation by Andrew Pitt (Aston University, UK) who presented his personal expert view on relevant scientific and technical developments.

It was noted that there was a need to understand the implications of scientific developments as well as understanding the developments themselves. There would be benefit in reviewing scientific and technological issues in a regular and consistent manner. There was reference to the convergence of scientific fields, most notably biology and chemistry. One area much discussed was genetic sequencing, for which new methods are getting significantly faster and costs are rapidly falling. However, use of such data to identify diseases can only be effective with global datasets to check against. A number of States Parties indicated views that it would be fairer to have such sequencing capacities around the world rather than provide samples to be sequenced elsewhere.

There was much discussion about the terms 'biosafety' and 'biosecurity' and whether these should be defined nationally or whether there should be international meanings which could then be applied appropriately in differing national contexts. Cuba, in the non-aligned statement, noted there was no international definition. The USA noted that the 2008 Meeting of States Parties (BWC/MSP/2008/5, para 20) had reached a common understanding of these terms. Cuba responded that this was only 'one understanding', not a definition, and so had no status. The UK suggested that the inter-sessional processes were to promote common understandings and if such understandings were to be disregarded later then the purpose of the meetings wasn't clear.

Cooperation and assistance

The afternoon session was on 'Cooperation and assistance, with a particular focus on strengthening cooperation and assistance under Article X', following on from Monday

afternoon. This was chaired by Ambassador Boujemâa Delmi of Algeria. Prepared statements were given by: Georgia, United Kingdom, Cuba (national capacity), World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), Algeria, India, Brazil, Canada, Iran and Interpol. The United States and Australia contributed to discussion. Richard Lennane (ISU) gave further details of the Article X database, on which Nigeria and Colombia contributed to discussion.

Many issues raised during the Monday afternoon session were raised again, although there were some notable new points. Georgia provided details of a bioterrorism workshop and table-top exercise held in cooperation with the USA during 2011. India noted that there is a need to ensure that assistance was not misused and there had to be a balance between Article III and Article X implementation. [Article III obliges States Parties not to assist others to have biological weapons.] Canada noted that its national contribution to the Global Partnership has been extended for five years from April 2013 and invited potential recipients of assistance under this programme to contact the Canadian delegation.

The OIE gave a presentation on its Biological Threat Reduction Strategy and highlighted details of its mandatory disease monitoring and reporting arrangements. A recent development is that the OIE has made arrangements with the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs on investigations of alleged use of animal disease as a weapon under the UN Secretary-General's investigative mechanism.

Wider political issues were raised in the room with Cuba suggesting that the blockade on its trade imposed by the USA prevented the purchase of biological materials and technologies for peaceful uses and was thus preventing implementation of Article X. The USA indicated it believed its policy on trade with Cuba was not incompatible with the BWC. Cuba asked for a 'right of reply'. The Chair noted that under the rules of procedure, a right of reply should be 'as brief as possible'. After eight minutes of Cuba speaking, and having already indicated that the right of reply statement was going on too long, the Chair cut the microphone. The delegation of Cuba expressed dissatisfaction with this action.

Poster session

After the afternoon's formal proceedings a poster session was with posters prepared by a number of States Parties, agencies and NGOs on subjects relevant to the topics under discussion at the MX. For those not familiar with poster sessions at scientific conferences, the authors of each poster stand next to it and so can engage with delegates who are interested in the subject matter. This creates an opportunity for focused, yet informal, interaction.

Side events

Two side events were held on Tuesday. The first, before the day's formal proceedings, was convened jointly by the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (NASU) and the University of Bradford on the subject of 'Recent Developments in Education and Awareness Raising on Biosafety and Biosecurity in Ukraine and the UK'. Presentations were given by Olena Kysil (NASU), Masamichi Minehata, Judi Sture and Malcolm Dando (all from Bradford). The event was chaired by Ambassador Serhiy Komisarenko (Ukraine)

The second event, at lunchtime, was convened by the Netherlands and the United States on 'Dual Use Research of Concern: The H5N1 Controversy and its Implications for Science Governance'. The event was introduced and chaired by Ambassador Laura Kennedy (USA). Presentations were given by Larry Kerr (USA), Marianne Donker (Netherlands) and Christopher Park (USA). Representatives of Indonesia and Japan were specifically invited to comment, and billed on the event flyer, as Indonesia was a source of viral strains used in the experiments and one of the researchers was a Japanese national.

This is the third report from the Meeting of Experts for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 16 to 20 July 2012 in Geneva. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). Copies of the reports are available via the BWPP website at <<http://www.bwpp.org>>.

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