

Monday 10th August 2015

The 2015 Meeting of Experts: background and issues

The 2015 Meeting of Experts (MX) is the last of four such meetings in the third inter-sessional process for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC). It will be followed by a Meeting of States Parties (MSP) to be held 14-18 December (the MSP date means that this year it will not clash with the annual Conference of the States Parties of the Chemical Weapons Convention which will be held in The Hague 30 November-4 December). These meetings are established by the five-yearly BWC Review Conferences, in this case by a decision adopted at the Seventh Review Conference in 2011. The inter-sessional meetings are intended to be practical and focused on promoting ideas and learning from experiences in order to develop common understanding and effective action. The 2015 meetings will be chaired by Ambassador Mazlan Muhammad of Malaysia, with two Vice-Chairs – Ambassador György Molnár of Hungary and Ambassador Henk Cor van der Kwast of the Netherlands.

Topics under discussion during the 2015 meetings

There are three on-going topics, also known as the standing agenda items, in the third inter-sessional process – ‘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 strengthen implementation of Article VII, including consideration of detailed procedures and mechanisms for the provision of assistance and cooperation by States Parties’, a topic that was also discussed in 2014. An informal rolling indicative schedule for the meeting is available, along with other materials, on the website of the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc/>>.

Article X of the BWC is about access to the life sciences for peaceful purposes. The renunciation of biological weapons and the control of the hostile uses of the life sciences have to be implemented so that they do not hinder the use of the life sciences for peaceful purposes. Article X also provides ‘the right to participate in, the fullest possible exchange’ of materials and technologies ‘for the use of bacteriological (biological) agents and toxins for peaceful purposes’. Cooperation and assistance goes further than Article X and includes other aspects such as capacity building. In earlier BWC meetings there have been many divergences of opinion relating to Article X issues.

The ongoing rapid advances and new developments within the life sciences mean that the Convention operates within a rapidly changing science and technology (S&T) context. These advances bring new positive opportunities for peaceful uses, such as new medical treatments, but they also lead to new negative opportunities for hostile uses and so lead to changes in the nature of risks and threats the BWC may need to counter. Understanding this changing context is seen as critical in ensuring efforts to control

biological weapons are kept relevant and effective. This year there is a focus on ‘advances in production, dispersal and delivery technologies of biological agents and toxins’.

Improved national implementation of the obligations contained within the Convention is seen as an important way of enhancing effectiveness of the overall regime to control biological weapons. Effective implementation in ways that are appropriate to national contexts has long been regarded as a significant challenge.

BWC Article VII deals with the provision of ‘assistance’ by States Parties if a State Party is ‘exposed to danger’ because of a breach of the Convention. No government is likely to have at its disposal the resources to respond to a severe biological attack and so the concept of receiving assistance applies to all countries. The 2006 Review Conference Final Document included language for the first time addressing one of the perceived weaknesses of the text of the Convention — that a relevant danger must come from a State Party to the Convention — by introducing language in referring to dangers from ‘anyone other than States Parties’, which would include non-states parties as well as non-state entities. The same language was included in 2011.

As this is the final year of this inter-sessional process, some discussion is likely about preparations for the Eighth BWC Review Conference which is to be held in 2016.

Preparations for the MX

A number of papers had been issued as formal MX documents by the end of the week before the meeting. Further papers, had been issued as ‘advance versions’ prior to being typeset as official documents.

The information papers are: ‘2014 Implementation of BWC Article X (Cooperation and Assistance)’ (Australia, INF.1), ‘Previous agreements and understandings under the Convention relevant to strengthening the implementation of Article VII, including consideration of detailed procedures and mechanisms for the provision of assistance and cooperation by States Parties’ (ISU, INF.2), ‘Background information on continuing challenges and obstacles to developing international cooperation, assistance and exchange’ (ISU, INF.3), and ‘International organizations that may be involved in the provision of and coordination of assistance relevant to Article’ (ISU, INF.4).

The Working Papers are on the subjects of: core assumptions and key questions in relation to Article VII (UK, WP.1); relevant lessons and follow-up action from the Ebola outbreak in west Africa (UK, WP.2); improving methods of work at BWC meetings (Russia and Belarus, WP.3), US high containment laboratory policy (USA, WP.4); production and delivery advances (USA, WP.5); tacit knowledge (USA, WP.6), proposal for an Article VII database (France and India, WP.7); convergence between biology and chemistry (Switzerland, WP.8+Corr.1); impact of science and technology advances on responses to infectious disease outbreaks (UK, WP.9); a dedicated process for reviewing developments in science and technology (Switzerland, WP.11); production, dispersal and delivery technologies (UK, WP.12); and the Benelux peer review exercise (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, WP.13).

The advance version papers are: ‘Proposal by the Russian Federation for inclusion in the report of the Eighth Review Conference of the Biological Weapons Convention’ (Russia); and ‘Implementation of Article VII’ (South Africa). These papers can be found via the ISU website; official documents can also be found via the UN documents server <<http://documents.un.org>>. Document references for this meeting all start BWC/MSP/2015/MX/, so the provisional agenda for the meeting is published as BWC/MSP/2015/MX/1 and the provisional programme of work as BWC/MSP/2015/MX/2.

Additional papers are likely to be issued.

This is the first report from the Meeting of Experts for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 10 to 14 August 2015 in Geneva.

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