

Thursday 9th August 2018

The conclusion of MX1, some reflections, and a look towards MX2

Wednesday saw the conclusion of the first of the Meetings of Experts (MXs) for this year under the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC). The topic for MX1 has been ‘Cooperation and Assistance, with a Particular Focus on Strengthening Cooperation and Assistance under Article X’.

After consideration of four sub-topics, MX1 adopted its formal report at 6pm. An initial draft had been circulated just before lunch, which was then updated in relation to proceedings during the afternoon. During discussion, some verbal amendments were made.

Mobilizing resources

The USA and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) (as a ‘Guest of the Meeting’ [GoM]) gave presentations. Venezuela/NAM, Germany, UK, and the Philippines took the floor after these. The USA spoke to its working paper (WP.3) on a workshop in Rabat in May 2018. CEPI outlined its work to support vaccines in cases where usual market forces lead to a lack of preparedness through a public-private partnership. The Philippines noted that the CBRN National Action Plans under the EU Centres of Excellence projects provide information that allow additional donors to understand where further assistance would have an impact.

Education, training, exchanges and twinning

China and the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) (as a GoM) gave presentations. Romania, India, UK, Venezuela/NAM, Germany, Switzerland, Brazil, Australia, Mali and USA took the floor following these. China spoke of the coordination between the Chinese Academy of Sciences and The World Academy of Sciences. ICGEB spoke of the work of the Centre in research, training and technology transfer. Many interventions illustrated specific programmes for training or exchanges of research staff. The need for ongoing programmes, rather than one-off activities, was emphasized. The development of human skills was recognized as an important complement to access to materials and technologies. The reduced costs of gaining scientific information through increasing use of open access academic journals were highlighted

Capacity building in biosafety, biosecurity and disease response

The UK and Norway spoke to their working papers (WP.2 [jointly with Canada] and WP.4, respectively). The first of these was on sustainability of laboratories handling dangerous pathogens in resource limited settings. The second related to an international workshop on cooperation and assistance held in Geneva in June. France gave a presentation on the sharing of experience in biosafety and biosecurity requirements through the establishment of a database. Russia described its work on a peptide vaccine for Ebola virus. The USA outlined activities of its Biosecurity Engagement Program. The Republic of Korea, Jordan, Japan, Venezuela/NAM, Saudi Arabia, Italy, India, Netherlands, Germany and Malaysia each took the floor. The EU spoke to its working paper (WP.8) on a conference in Rabat in

October 2017. The session concluded with presentations by the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and Interpol on their work on building capacity to respond to outbreaks. Earlier in the day, the United Arab Emirates had made a statement on behalf of the ‘Arab Group’ which was recorded as contributing to this agenda item.

Collaboration with international organizations and networks

Presentations were given by the World Health Organization (WHO) and Interpol. Romania, Venezuela/NAM, Brazil, Mali and Switzerland took the floor following these. The WHO noted that there were many challenges to dealing with deliberately induced diseases that were harder than those for dealing with naturally occurring outbreaks.

Reflections on MX1

MX1 has produced two days of intensive working. Indeed, from memory, there has been more detailed discussion during MX1 about practical aspects of Article X implementation than this author has experienced in any single one of the MXs in earlier inter-sessional processes. There doesn’t seem to be a clear single reason for this, but one influence may be that the delay in putting together this latest ISP has perhaps focused minds so that delegates have been keen to make the most of opportunities. Ambassador Maria Teresa Almojuela (Philippines) has fulfilled the role of the Chair extremely effectively, creating an atmosphere of interactivity that has enabled continued substantive work.

Looking to the long term, certain of the fundamentals of the divergence of views on Article X remain unchanged, but there is some movement. Perceptions of Article X are closely related to how the BWC is seen overall. For those who see the BWC first and foremost as a disarmament and security treaty, the role of Article X is to ensure that the prohibitions to prevent the use of disease as a weapon do not unduly hinder peaceful activities. For those who see the BWC as having a broader remit perceive all the articles as carrying equal significance and therefore deserving of equal implementation effort. There are many who hold positions somewhere in between these two. Where on this continuum any particular delegate may sit depends on a number of political, geographic and economic influences. The change is a growing perception amongst some of those that see the BWC primarily as a security treaty of the global benefits through greater implementation of Article X (and the overlap with Article VII) that reduce biological threats for all humankind.

Preparations for MX2

The series of MXs moves to MX2 for Thursday and Friday, for which the overarching topic is ‘Review of Developments in the Field of Science and Technology Related to the Convention’. The ongoing rapid advances within the life sciences mean that the BWC operates within a rapidly changing scientific and technological (S&T) context which includes advances for peaceful uses as well as possible hostile uses. Activities taking place under the auspices of the Convention cannot operate effectively unless this constantly changing context is well understood. At the time of writing, six MX2 working papers were available as official documents, with a further three available as advance versions. There is also an ISU background information document. These materials, as ever, can be found via the BWC ISU meetings website – <<https://www.unog.ch/bwc/meeting>>.

Side events

There were two lunchtime events on Wednesday. One, entitled ‘Emerging Infectious Diseases: Detection, response, assistance and challenges’, was convened by India. The other, convened by the Johns Hopkins Center for Health and Security, was entitled ‘Laboratory Biosafety & Biocontainment: Global Norms and Implementation’

This is the third report from the series of five BWC Meetings of Experts which are being held from 7 to 16 August 2018 in Geneva. Reports are posted to <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>> and <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>>. An email subscription link is available on each page.

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