

Tuesday 24th July 2012

The 2012 Meeting of Experts: the final day

The final day of the 2012 Meeting of Experts (MX) of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) completed its programme of work on Friday 20 July, including adoption of the final report of the Meeting. At the opening of the morning session the Chair of the MX, Ambassador Boujemâa Delmi of Algeria, noted that it was the first day of Ramadan and wished all those in the room who followed the Islamic faith, and in Geneva, happiness, health and peace.

Adoption of the final report

As with previous practice, a draft of the report of the MX together with drafts of sections of the combined list of proposals and suggestions made during the meeting had been circulated. The report is essentially procedural. As the drafts were acceptable to all delegations, the MX was adjourned in order that typeset copies of the draft report could be printed. At 11.47 the Meeting was reconvened and at 11.51 the report was formally adopted.

In his closing remarks, the Chair noted there had been a spirit of constructiveness and that the Meeting had brought together experts from a variety of backgrounds. He considered the Meeting to have been ‘very fruitful’. Australia also made some closing remarks. The Meeting was closed at 12.04.

Side events

There were no side events held on Friday.

Reflections

A conscious effort is taken in writing these daily summaries to report the facts and not give opinion. However, there are many times that the question is raised – ‘so what do you think about what happened?’ While the role of a commentator should be to try to report what is happening in an impartial manner, there are times that this style of reporting does not convey some of the atmosphere of meetings. The following are some personal reflections that do not necessarily represent anyone’s views other than the author’s own.

This MX was the first meeting in the third inter-sessional process. There has been significant development of activities since the first inter-sessional process was adopted at the resumed Fifth BWC Review Conference in 2002. The meetings are now much more open and there is a greater interaction with real-world activities. While the BWC remains a creature of the States Parties, those States Parties around the world themselves need to interact with practitioners in the life sciences and it is worth noting that these practitioners also have their own international networks. This is useful progress, yet there is more that could be done to gain further value from the inter-sessional process.

Ambassador Boujemâa Delmi's informal session on Thursday morning enlivened the proceedings. While many of the participants in the discussion in the room had already spoken in formal sessions the atmosphere was much more down to earth. This session also prompted many further discussions outside the room between delegates over coffee. The liveliness continued into the afternoon session that followed. Of all of the issues raised in the informal session, the two that seemed to have the most resonance were about the side events and scheduling of sub-topics. The clearest mark of success of the side events is that, although they were once exclusively convened by NGOs, States Parties and international bodies have been increasingly choosing to convene side events to raise issues for discussion in preference to the main conference room. There may be benefit in some examination of why this is happening and identifying how the benefits of side events, not least their flexibility of format and greater interaction they prompt, could be replicated in the conference room. Clustering presentations by sub-topics so that a number of presentations on a similar theme could be followed by a more focused discussion period before moving on to the next sub-topic would be beneficial. Such scheduling might also allow presenters on similar themes to have a chance to consult each other and this might reduce repetition between presentations.

On Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), it was satisfying to see that four States Parties had each submitted a return for the first time this year – Madagascar, Pakistan, Singapore and Zimbabwe. More still needs to be done to promote the perspective that producing returns should be an expected activity of BWC States Parties (or as one delegate put it: 'politically binding is not a euphemism for voluntary'.) The view that CBMs are a diversion from moving towards classical verification measures is strongly held by some although not always overtly expressed. However, if negotiations towards a verification system were ever to be restarted, a key input into such negotiations would be the experiences of States Parties in putting together the information required for their CBM returns.

The run-up to this Meeting of Experts had suffered from some uncertainty. The Seventh BWC Review Conference had taken decisions in December on what should be in the new inter-sessional process but not how it should operate. This was a rational approach in the circumstances as it was a challenge to get agreement on the package itself. Additional external distractions such as the change of Chair and the political attention on the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) negotiations, which drew the focus of work of many disarmament officials away from the BWC during the first half of the year, added to this. The uncertainty meant many participants were not sure precisely what to expect. This may have reduced the numbers of experts travelling to the Meeting. The ATT conference, being held in New York through most of July, drew many Ambassadors away from Geneva for the MX itself. The ATT was not the only diversion. There was a certain irony on Wednesday afternoon that while MX delegates were discussing national implementation issues, including challenges, most of the potential donors for assistance were in a parallel meeting discussing assistance priorities in the Global Partnership Biosecurity Working Group.

The impact of all of these factors on the Meeting, while noticeable, did not significantly impede the work undertaken.

All-in-all, this Meeting of Experts allowed for a productive exchange of information and experiences. There remains within the meeting room hesitation by some delegates to allow meetings to build on previous experience and interactions (the discussion on Tuesday on what is meant by biosafety and biosecurity is a case in point) and more significant progress might be made if this hesitation could be reduced.

This is the sixth and final report from the Meeting of Experts for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which was held from 16 to 20 July 2012 in Geneva. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). The reports are designed to help people who are not in Geneva to follow the proceedings. Copies of these reports and those from the earlier meetings are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>>.

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