

Wednesday 15th August 2018

## First day of MX4 - assistance, response and preparedness

The fourth in the series of 2018 Meetings of Experts (MXs) under the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) opened on Tuesday to examine the topic of 'Assistance, Response and Preparedness'. The Chair of MX4, Daniel Nord (Sweden), started the day's proceedings with a record-breaking run through of the opening formalities in under 4 minutes. Before the start of the day's proceedings, the Chair of the Meeting of States Parties (to be held in December), Ljupco Jivan Gjorgjinski (former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) held informal consultations on the difficult financial position of the BWC under his mandate to produce an information paper on the subject. At the end of the day, the action points from the NGO joint position paper relating to MX4 were communicated to the meeting.

Now that the official reports of the MXs are indicating which delegations are taking the floor under each sub-topic/agenda item (although these reports have not been published yet owing to time constraints), it may be a better use of space in these daily reports to select themes that warrant more detailed examination. Hence, this report will detail themes raised rather than the sequence that issues arose under the meeting agenda.

### **Contextual influences on the debate**

The contemporary perspectives on infectious disease are of direct relevance to the Article VII debate. While the 2014 Ebola virus disease outbreak in West Africa was of natural origin, the many interventions making reference to it indicate that there has been widespread recognition that there are a number of lessons that can be learned from the response efforts for that outbreak that could apply to any future disease outbreak triggered by the use of biological weapons. Such lessons might be applied at the local, national, regional and international levels and so are not specifically limited to issues relating to Article VII.

### **Commonality of capacities for natural and deliberate disease outbreaks**

Saudi Arabia noted its preparations in relation to the naturally occurring disease amongst the high numbers of people who travel there on pilgrimage each year. The response capabilities deriving from these preparations enhance abilities to respond to deliberate disease. Brazil spoke of its preparations for dealing with mass gathering events such as the 2014 World Cup and their potential for natural spread of disease as well as potential as a target for biological attack. More broadly, benefits of effective disease surveillance were highlighted as this capacity assists with handling an outbreak on a national scale but is also vital in conveying information to those outside of the country that might provide assistance. On an international level, it was clear that synergies existed between international organizations with relevant mandates. There were suggestions that the BWC should have some of its own disease response capacities while others queried whether this would be a cost-effective way of dealing with the challenges.

A number of interventions indicated that for most scenarios it would be difficult to distinguish in the early stages whether an outbreak was natural or deliberate. This was

specifically noted in WP.7 from Japan (with co-sponsors). Whether a natural or deliberate outbreak, a number of interventions noted there would be some form of emergency in public health terms and so numerous agencies would be involved from the start.

The discussion also highlighted differences between activities for dealing with natural or deliberate outbreaks. Concerns were raised about whether bodies such as the World Health Organization should be engaged with any assessment of the cause of an outbreak if there were indications it was deliberate in case this brought the health body into the security realm with potential negative consequences for other health work. A number of contributions to the discussion noted that health officials would have different roles to officials looking to attribute the cause of an attack and there was a need to ensure that effective ways of operating together were established. An example of the challenges was given in WP.10 from the USA in the section on ‘preservation of evidence’.

### **Requesting assistance**

In 2014, South Africa raised questions about how a state party might go about requesting assistance under Article VII, leading to a working paper at that year’s MX. These ideas were developed further and are contained in WP.3 for this meeting. Speaking to the paper, South Africa noted the importance of making the process workable in order to enable prompt assistance. There was a positive response to the further development of these guidelines, although it is not clear through what process such development might be carried out. The OPCW noted its experience in dealing with assistance activities, highlighting that any official communication would start the assistance process.

Article VII states its provisions are only active ‘if the Security Council decides that such Party has been exposed to danger as a result of violation of the Convention’. Iran raised concerns about the use of the veto if a P-5 country was alleged to have been involved in an attack. Brazil suggested that the BWC should have its own decision mechanism.

### **Article VII database**

Paragraph 47 of the final document of the Eighth Review Conference held in 2016 reads: ‘The Conference supports the establishment of a database open to all States Parties to facilitate assistance under the framework of Article VII. The purpose of this database could be one way to help implement Article VII of the Convention and allow matching specific offers and requests for assistance.’ However, the difficult negotiations of other sections of that final document meant that those parts of it that would have given a specific mandate and a budget for such a database were not agreed upon. One MX4 delegate described this as a ‘decision in principle’ for the Article VII database. France and India had initially proposed the Article VII database at the 2015 MSP and put forward a working paper (with co-sponsors) to the Preparatory Committee of the Eighth Review Conference (WP.38). Both spoke to this paper in MX4, describing its potential as an important resource tool requiring a substantive discussion to move its development forward. Russia spoke to elements of a paper (WP.1) which included some examples of types of information that could be included in the database. No delegation spoke against the concept of the database.

### **Side events**

There were three side events on Tuesday. One, before the start of proceedings, entitled ‘Article VII project’, was convened by Canada. Two were held at lunchtime, convened by France on ‘Triggering Article VII’ and by Russia on ‘Mechanisms for delivering protection from biological weapons under the BWC: mobile biomedical units, Article VII database and other options and their combinations’.

*This is the seventh 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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