

Thursday 8th August 2019

The closing day of MX4 and the BWC financial situation

The fourth of the 2019 series of Meetings of Experts (MXs) concluded on Wednesday on the topic of ‘Assistance, Response and Preparedness’. Before the plenary proceedings there were informal consultations on the financial situation of the Convention.

The meeting covered two substantive agenda items and adopted its procedural report. A common thread in the two substantive items was integration – in two contexts. The first was integration between agencies, whether local, national or international. In any situation where there is a significant public health problem, whether caused by nature or by deliberate act, there will be numerous agencies operating with different roles, responsibilities and mandates. Effective response requires appropriate cooperation which requires preparation. The second sense of integration was that of policies across human, animal and plant health – the core of the ‘one health’ concept which recognizes that weaknesses in policies dealing with one of these areas can weaken policies in others.

Space constraints mean reflections on MX4 will be held over to the final daily report for this series of MXs.

Exploration of approaches – This agenda item is the hardest to capture in summary for a section heading – its full title is ‘Exploration of approaches by which States Parties, individually or collectively, might contribute to the strengthening of international response capabilities for infectious disease outbreaks, whether natural or deliberate in origin’. The agenda item was started on Tuesday and continued into Wednesday. Australia introduced WP.2 which is an update on its Health Security Initiative for the Indo-Pacific region. Japan spoke to WP.3 on strengthening measures for responding to emerging infectious diseases, including the establishment of a new rapid response team; and to WP.4 that outlined a programme of seminars and workshops on strengthening capacities to prepare for and respond to deliberate use of biological weapons. These were followed by three technical presentations. Belgium provided a briefing on the Laboratoire Fédéral d’orientation (FOL) – a laboratory designed to test unknown samples that are suspected to be of a CBRN nature. The UK introduced the work of the National CBRN Centre, a multi-agency unit which assists civilian response by the police, fire and ambulance services to CBRN incidents. The International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) spoke of the work of the Centre in building capacities. In the discussion that followed, Brazil suggested a need to avoid duplication of other measures such as the WHO International Health Regulations. Switzerland noted a seminar later this year in support of developing a network of designated laboratories to deal with biological incidents. Malaysia spoke of an ASEAN workshop to exchange experiences and good practice in disease response. The EU highlighted preparedness projects funded from its new Council Decision. Synergies between capacity building under Article X and under Article VII were identified, such as improved detection of diseases.

Agriculture, livestock and the environment – The USA introduced WP.1 which draws on its experiences in bringing different arms of government together to counter biological threats to agriculture. Canada spoke to WP.5 which describes activities it supports

through the Global Partnership that build capacity against use of biological agents against livestock. A technical presentation from the International Plant Protection Convention Secretariat described work done on plant pest surveillance and noted that 2020 would be the International Year of Plant Health, prompting comments from the floor that there may be benefits in highlighting this in the MXs next year. In the discussion that followed, China noted challenges of controlling an outbreak of African Swine Fever, as there are no effective drugs for treatment nor is there a licenced vaccine, although vaccine research is progressing. The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) provided details of its Performance of Veterinary Services (PVS) Pathway used for capacity building.

A look towards MX5 – MX5 will be the last in the series of MXs for 2019. This will be a one-day MX on the topic of ‘Institutional Strengthening of the Convention’ with just a single sub-topic: ‘Consideration of the full range of approaches and options to further strengthen the Convention and its functioning, through possible additional legal measures or other measures, in the framework of the Convention.’

The BWC financial situation – The Chair of the 2019 Meeting of States Parties (MSP), Ambassador Yann Hwang (France), held informal consultations with delegates from states parties to discuss the financial situation for the BWC which remains difficult. Non-payments of agreed assessments by a number of states parties continue to cause problems. While some of these eventually appear as late payments, the ongoing deficit is sufficiently large to put the MSP at risk. As the financial accounting period is the calendar year, the MSP at the end of the year is always going to be the most vulnerable activity if there is a financial shortfall. In 2018, some economies were made on the MSP by having one informal day of activities without interpretation, putting a number of delegates at a disadvantage. The government of France has a clearly stated position on multilingualism within multilateralism and so the MSP Chair would be extremely reluctant to implement a similar route to financial savings. The Working Capital Fund established by the 2018 MSP is specifically designed not to subsidise non-payment, but to smooth out cash flow during the year. Depleting the fund -- which is not even close to its target value – in its first year to cover the costs of the MSP would render it useless for purposes of supporting core activities such as the ISU. There are also financial implications of decisions that will need to be taken in relation to the Ninth Review Conference to be held in 2021. The key decision is the duration of the Conference itself and its preparatory meetings. During the 2018 MSP, states parties asked for earlier notification of what their assessed contributions would be each year. As contributions are due each 1 January, this means sending the invoices out a few months in advance. As the 2020 MSP would be after the date that the invoices would be sent out for 2021, the budget for the Review Conference would need to have been set before this. The logical meeting to take duration decisions on the Review Conference and its associated meetings is therefore the MSP this December.

Side Events – There were three side events on Wednesday. One at breakfast was convened by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) and Norway on ‘Gender-responsive BWC? Understanding gender-related impacts of biological weapons and implications for assistance, response and preparedness’. The two events at lunchtime were convened by the United Kingdom and the British Medical Journal on ‘The British Medical Journal’s Clinical Decision Support (CDS) Training Initiative: Its Relevance for the BTWC’; and by France and the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique on ‘Outcome of the tabletop exercise for West African States Parties in Lomé in May 2019’.

NOTE: There will be an additional MX report covering MX5. This will be published sometime next week and will be posted at the web locations given below.

This is the eighth report from the series of five Meetings of Experts for the BWC which are being held from 29 July to 8 August 2019 in Geneva. These reports have been produced for all BWC meetings since the Sixth Review Conference in 2006 by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). They are posted to <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>> and <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>>. An email subscription link is available on each page. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie, CBW Events <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.