

Friday 20th July 2012

The 2012 Meeting of Experts: the fourth day

The fourth day of the 2012 Meeting of Experts (MX) of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) included sessions on the topics of CBMs and national implementation. The morning also included an unprecedented informal session.

A draft of the report of the MX together with a first iteration of the combined list of proposals made during the meeting were circulated in the meeting room during the morning. Both drafts are based on past practice.

Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs)

The morning session was on 'How to enable fuller participation in the CBMs', the first session of the MX devoted to the topic. Prepared statements were given by: Iran (for the non-aligned), Switzerland, USA, UK, Iran (national capacity), Australia, Belarus, Canada, Russia, South Africa, Germany.

Although CBMs were noted as being important, some interventions stressed that they should not be over-emphasised, while others suggested they were a 'cornerstone' of the Convention. Low participation was raised as a concern, and there were divergent views over whether producing returns is an expected activity of a BWC State Party, a debate that has continued for some years. It was suggested that a better debate might be on what the value of CBMs might be in building confidence. The USA indicated it would support civil society analysis of CBM returns. Canada noted that it would assist in translating some CBM returns into English. Responding to some points raised in discussion, Richard Lennane (ISU) stated that 62 returns had been received so far in 2012. Four states that had not previously submitted had done so this year – Madagascar, Pakistan, Singapore and Zimbabwe.

Informal session on the Meeting

With some time remaining in the morning the Chair of the MX, Ambassador Boujemâa Delmi of Algeria, adjourned the formal session and convened an informal session to discuss how the MX was proceeding. He presented the room with a number of questions, such as: have the methodology and structure achieved what was hoped for; have the sub-topics corresponded to the objectives of the MX; and, is it possible to bring into the MX the active interactions that happen in the side events?

Ambassador Delmi specifically asked that participants feel free to give their personal views and not speak on behalf of their governments. The idea was to find practical ways to make the most of the Meeting of Experts. Delegates responded with frank and open discussion on how the MX had progressed. The Chair ensured that this discussion was deliberately off-the-cuff. With this in mind, views are not attributed to individuals in the reporting below as many people were providing their spontaneous responses to ideas. NGO representatives in the room were also allowed to contribute to this discussion, which was

unprecedented in the BWC experience. The informal session was described as a tremendous innovation and there were no expressions of opinion opposed to holding it.

Suggestions were made that it might be better to cluster sub-topics better so that presentations on similar themes could be heard together and then a short discussion period would allow focused interaction. The present arrangement in which States Parties are heard in the order in which they come forward leads to a random pattern in subject matter of presentations; indeed, some presentations do not fit with the issues under discussion, so more scheduling of sub-topics could be useful. Other suggestions for focusing discussion included starting a topic with a panel discussion or providing some questions to prompt debate.

The side events were seen as a valuable part of the Meeting process and that their informal nature created a productive working environment. Questions were raised about how informal sessions would fit in with the rules of procedure which prompted the response 'informal is informal'. This did, however, highlight an issue of how any useful output of an informal session could appear in the official records of the Meeting. It was noted that side events often captured real world activities more than the formal sessions. The formal sessions tended to report on what has happened while side events were often looking forwards. Such forward looking is important as the pace of scientific developments is significantly faster than that of political developments. The value of the Meetings as networking opportunities was highlighted and that this aspect should be improved, if possible.

National implementation

The afternoon session was on 'Strengthening national implementation', following on from the session on Wednesday afternoon. Prepared statements were given by: Canada, India, Algeria and China. There followed a discussion that included some of the statement contributors plus UK, Nigeria and USA. The final presentation of the session was a 'guest of the meeting' presentation by Scott Spence (VERTIC) on 'National Implementation of the BWC: a case study'. This prompted further debate and follow-on comment from USA, UK, Belarus, Philippines, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Netherlands, Interpol and Algeria.

The prepared statements from States Parties, by chance, illustrated the diversity of issues that must be encompassed within national implementation, with the presentation from Canada focused on management and control of human pathogens, that from India focused on export controls and that from China covering law enforcement issues. The VERTIC presentation took the form of a scenario intended to prompt thinking about which elements of national legislation would governments find helpful. The scenario revolved around possible further research involving H5N1 avian influenza.

Side event

A breakfast side event was convened by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) on 'A Tested Methodology to Assess Risks of Dual-Use Technologies and Evaluate Governance Options' – based on a new book, 'Innovation, Dual Use and Security: Managing the Risks of Emerging Biological and Chemical Technologies', edited by Jonathan B Tucker who passed away suddenly in July 2011. The event was introduced and chaired by Theresa Hitchens (UNIDIR). Presentations were given by Amy E. Smithson (Center for Nonproliferation Studies) and Ralf Trapp (consultant).

Please note: there will be a sixth report covering the final day of the Meeting of Experts that will be e-mailed out and placed on the website below

This is the fifth report from the Meeting of Experts for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being 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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