

Tuesday 23rd November 2021

## The opening day of the 2020 Meeting of States Parties

The 2020 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) opened on Monday morning with Ambassador Cleopa Mailu (Kenya) in the Chair. The proceedings for the day were primarily devoted to ‘general debate’ – the exchange of views through plenary statements in which any BWC-relevant issues can be raised by delegations. During the day, six additional working papers were published and three virtual side events were held. Details can be found via the official website of the meeting <<https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/bwc-msp-2020/>>.

The MSP is being held in Salle XIX, the same room that the Meetings of Experts (MXs) were held in earlier this year. The pandemic-related restrictions remain in place which have a direct impact on proceedings. There were more people in the room on Monday than there had been during the MXs. Proceedings were streamed via UN WebTV <<https://media.un.org/en/webtv/>> and some statements were given virtually.

### Opening of the meeting

The Chair, in his opening remarks, noted that this was the last MSP before the Ninth Review Conference and so there was much to do to prepare for it. He noted the global disruption caused by the pandemic and highlighted that this illustrated the need for improved responses to biological threats, stressing that ‘no state, big or small, can fight an invisible threat alone’.

The MSP received a video message from Izumi Nakamitsu, UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, who urged early and thorough preparations for the Ninth Review Conference. She noted that the inter-sessional work programme had generated ‘several initiatives worthy of serious attention’ and called for ‘high-level political attention’ to be paid to the Convention.

There were brief administrative formalities, such as adoption of the agenda, and decisions on participation in the meeting. The Meeting was informed that the European Union had provided sponsorship to enhance participation by developing states parties to assist 11 experts to attend the MSP through the programme administered by the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) and that the USA had also assisted two experts to attend on a bilateral basis.

### The general debate and themes raised

Although the general debate will continue into Tuesday, it is possible to identify a number of themes raised. As the topics of the MXs will be covered in detail as the MSP continues, the focus in the reporting here will be on themes that fall outside of those topics. The prepared statement by the USA marked a change of posture since the MXs and so some details of this statement are highlighted below. The meeting heard statements from Azerbaijan (on behalf of the NAM), China (on behalf of China and Russia), Sweden, Serbia, State of Palestine, Guatemala, Japan, Luxembourg, Ukraine, India, Kenya, Russia, Sri Lanka, Germany, China, Malaysia, Canada, Spain, France, Georgia, Iraq, Philippines, Nepal, Republic of Korea, Netherlands, Pakistan, Panama, Argentina, United States, Thailand, Turkey, Nigeria, Finland, Peru, Jamaica, United Kingdom, Greece, Switzerland,

Lithuania, Mexico, Austria, Italy, Brazil, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Chile, Indonesia, Iran, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Australia, Cuba, Venezuela and Bahrain.

*Pandemic-related issues* – a number of aspects of the pandemic were raised in various forms. Many points raised were based on an underlying suggestion that the significant impacts of the pandemic illustrated a lack of preparedness for response to biological threats, whatever their source. Advances in the life sciences that allowed for the rapid development of COVID-19 vaccines were highlighted. Some references were made to challenges of inequalities of access to vaccines. Lessons of multilateral responses were highlighted in general terms. Mentions were made of the forthcoming special session of the World Health Assembly on a pandemic treaty but references to potential interactions with the BWC were in very general terms, perhaps because the possible scope of any pandemic treaty has not yet been clearly defined. The question of what is needed to be done within the BWC to maintain its relevance was raised in rhetorical form in a number of statements – in more than one case this took the form of asking whether the *status quo* is enough to deal with modern biological threats, whether from deliberate, accidental or natural causes.

*Financial issues* – a large number of statements made direct reference to financial issues, urging states parties with arrears to fulfil their obligations. There were a number of references to the detrimental effects that financial uncertainty can have on activities within the BWC. Many statements suggested that the only sustainable solution to the financial issues was for states parties to pay their dues in full and on time. Further promises of contributions to the Working Capital Fund were made. The question was raised whether the arrears reflected political choices not to pay.

*Universality* – a number of statements noted with regret that there had been no new members of the BWC in the past two years. Kazakhstan informed the MSP that it had ratified the 1925 Geneva Protocol during 2020.

*ISU extension* – many delegations spoke positively of temporarily extending the ISU mandate. No delegation spoke against this.

*Anniversaries* – A number of references were made to 50th anniversaries connected with the BWC, from the adoption of the text in Geneva in September 1971, approval by the UN General Assembly in November 1971, opening for signature in April 1972 and entry into force in March 1975.

*Overseas labs* – the China-Russia statement communicated the text of a statement made by the two governments on 7 October. An element of this statement was that ‘over 200 US biological laboratories are deployed outside its national territory, which function in opaque and non-transparent manner’ and that ‘such activities pose serious risks for the national security of the Russian Federation and China, and are detrimental to the security of relevant regions’. The USA, invoking a ‘right to reply’ at the end of the day, responded that these are not US-owned laboratories, but laboratories supported by US assistance for peaceful purposes and owned by the countries in which they are located.

*The Jenkins statement* – Bonnie Jenkins, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, travelled to Geneva to give the US prepared statement. She described the efforts to strengthen the Convention as ‘treading water’ for two decades and suggested the biological weapons threat was ‘real, serious, and, in many respects, growing’. Outlining a two-pronged approach which would include actions that could be taken immediately, such as a number of initiatives discussed during the MXs, she suggested the second prong should be the establishment of ‘a new expert working group’ to look at further measures including those that would ‘enhance assurance of compliance’. The statement marks a change in US posture although it is not clear how far this process might go. It is notable that Jenkins has had considerable experience of the Convention and has previously attended BWC meetings as an Ambassador and as an NGO representative.

*This is the second report from the 2020 MSP of the Biological Weapons Convention being held from 22 to 25 November 2021 in Geneva. These reports have been produced for all BWC meetings since the Sixth Review Conference in 2006 by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) and are available from <<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 written by Richard Guthrie, CBW Events, who is solely responsible for their contents. He can be contacted via <[richard@cbw-events.org.uk](mailto:richard@cbw-events.org.uk)>.*