

Tuesday 30th July 2019

The start of the Meetings of Experts: MX1 - cooperation and assistance

The first Meeting of Experts (MX1) in the 2019 series opened on Monday morning with Ambassador Victor Dolidze (Georgia) in the Chair. Owing to refurbishment work in the Palais des Nations, MX1 opened in Room XX [renowned for its elaborately decorated ceiling] instead of the usual location for BWC meetings two floors below. One advantage of using Room XX is that the proceedings can be webcast via <<<http://webtv.un.org/>>>.

After brief opening formalities, six sub-topics were covered during Monday, the full titles of which can be found in the agenda for MX1. There was a full day of activities which means that this report can only be a selective snapshot of proceedings. The background information document [BWC/MSP/2018/MX.1/2] produced by the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) for the MX1 held in 2018 contains much information relevant to the discussions this year.

At the end of the formal proceedings there was a chance for a short collective statement by some non-governmental organizations on MX1-related issues. The NGO contributions in each MX will be posted by the ISU to the BWC website.

Consideration of the Article X reports by states parties

A number of delegations noted the low number of such reports submitted. The ISU highlighted that the number of Article X reports in any year has never reached double figures and noted that it was not clear how the information within the reports was used by readers. The UK spoke to its working paper [WP.5] that provides an 'indicative overview' of the range of UK activities that 'support the aims and objectives of Article X'. A number of other delegations, for example, China, France, India and Japan, made statements indicating the scope of their support for Article X-related activities. A number of recipients of assistance took the floor to report on supported activities; for example, Morocco illustrated how assistance received for its implementation of the BWC had made this more effective and Kenya described the role of assistance in building its national capacities. Germany noted the key importance of a sense of 'national ownership' of projects by the recipients. There was some discussion on whether there should be a standard format or template for submission of Article X reports. There was a recognition that this might make it easier to compile reports and make it easier to compare the contents of different reports; but there was also a recognition that each country's experience of Article X was different and so there needed to be flexibility in how some information was conveyed in reports. Australia highlighted its paper from the 2018 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) [WP.2 of that meeting] which discussed report formats, encouraged others to consider using its suggested template, and expressed interest in knowing if anyone might have identified possible improvements when preparing their reports. Iran suggested that for reports to be 'meaningful' they had to cover all aspects of Article X and highlighted the section of the Article that referred to 'fullest possible exchange'.

The Assistance and Cooperation Database

It was highlighted that usage remains low, despite rebuilding of the database. The ISU noted that the first iteration of the database was unfunded when the Seventh Review

Conference decided to establish it in 2011 and that an enhanced database system was only able to be developed following a voluntary offer of financial resources from Ireland. In discussion, it was suggested that requests and offers were not always well defined and greater clarity might increase usage. Suggestions were made that the ISU be more proactive in operating as a clearing house, potentially even engaging a cooperation and assistance officer; financial implications of such a move were noted. There was some discussion about widening the database coverage to include non-governmental offers with questions raised about how any such offers could be validated. China noted that one of its database offers related to workshops on capacity building of biosafety laboratories organized with the Chinese Academy of Sciences at the Wuhan Institute of Virology with sponsored participation of scientists from developing countries.

Identification of challenges and obstacles and possible means of overcoming them

The USA spoke to its paper [WP.1] which has a particular focus on interactions with the private sector and what that delegation describes as the ‘environments in which these industries can thrive’. Venezuela (on behalf of the non-aligned) spoke to its paper [WP.3] which is a restatement of earlier proposals for an Article X compliance mechanism and a co-operation committee. Iran spoke to its paper [WP.4] which is focused on what that delegation describes as ‘restrictive policies’ relating to transfer controls. There was a technical presentation under this sub-topic by the USA on its Export Control and Related Border Security Program <<<http://www.state.gov/export-control-and-related-border-security-program/>>>.

Development of guidelines and procedures for mobilizing resources

MX1 was informed that 20 experts had received assistance enabling their participation in the series of MXs via the ISU-coordinated sponsorship programme funded through voluntary contributions. In the last 12 months, the sponsorship programme has been supported by donations from Australia, Canada, Germany and the EU. The ISU noted that Norway had stated during the 2018 MSP that it was planning a voluntary contribution in support of Article X activities. India noted many Article X contributions are given in kind, so don’t always have a direct financial value, and suggested a voluntary trust fund could be established to provide support for cooperation and assistance activities.

Facilitation of education, training, exchange and twinning programmes

This sub-topic focused on human issues. The ISU highlighted that a workshop of 20 young life scientists would be held at the weekend as part of the ‘Fostering Biosecurity Networks in the Global South’ project sponsored by the EU. Germany noted its Munich Medical Biodefence Conference, which was listed as an offer on the Cooperation and Assistance Database as there was some support available for participants from lower per capita GDP countries. The United Arab Emirates spoke of a conference it is organizing for October 2019 on sustainable biosafety, that follows three others it had held on related topics in recent years.

Promotion of capacity building

The UK spoke to its paper [WP.2] that provides an overview of the British Medical Journal Clinical Decision Support Training Initiative <<<http://cds.bmj.com>>>, which was then described in a technical presentation by the BMJ [as a Guest of the Meeting]. This was followed by a technical presentation by Hungary on the European Research Infrastructure on Highly Pathogenic Agents <<<http://www.erinha.eu>>>.

Side event

There was one side event on Monday, convened by Russia on an international conference held in Sochi in June entitled “Global biosecurity challenges. Problems and solutions”.

This is the second 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 are produced 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>.