

Wednesday 1st September 2021

MX1 on cooperation and assistance: a summary of the proceedings

The first of the 2020 Meetings of Experts (MXs) to the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) opened on Monday morning with Kimmo Laukkanen (Finland) in the Chair on the topic of ‘Cooperation and assistance, with a particular focus on strengthening cooperation and assistance under Article X’. Report 1 of this series provides some background to the two-day meeting. MX1 materials, including documents, presentations and statements are posted by the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) to <https://meetings.unoda.org/section/bwc-mx-2020-mx1/>.

The MXs this year are in Salle XIX, upstairs from where most of the BWC meetings have previously been held, with two overflow rooms available downstairs that are usually used for side events. The pandemic precautions have given the meeting a different atmosphere from those that have gone before. Many delegates viewed the meeting remotely through the public UN WebTV <https://media.un.org/en/webtv/>. Some interventions were made remotely, either through a video link or by being pre-recorded. No side events are being held in the Palais des Nations during the MXs although some virtual side events are being held online.

Before starting the formal parts of the MX, the Chair gave the floor to Maria Teresa Almojuela (Philippines), Chair of MX1 in 2018, who reflected that the development of ideas within MX1 in this inter-sessional work programme had been within four clusters: strengthening existing measures; new measures to institutionalize a more pragmatic approach; concrete initiatives ready to be rolled out that should be scalable; and broad proposals for enhancing synergies between networks.

At the end of the formal proceedings on the first day a short collective statement by some non-governmental organizations was given on MX1 issues. As part of efforts to promote language diversity, this was presented in French.

Of the 12 available working hours over Monday and Tuesday, over 9 were used for the substantive discussions with about 1.5 hours used for opening formalities and adoption of the report, the latter of which took longer than expected but included some decisions on reporting elements that will apply to the other MXs.

Thematic discussion

As the formal reports of each MX lists the speakers under each agenda item, these will not be listed here. The themes chosen for reporting here are based on the agenda items of the meeting, but may include points relevant to a theme raised under another agenda item.

One change from the past is that in 2018 and 2019 there was a collective NAM statement for most agenda items, but none during this MX. This may be a reflection of reduced numbers of experts travelling to Geneva and so fewer chances for coordination.

Article X implementation reports – The ISU noted that 5 of these had been submitted in 2018, 3 in 2019, 1 in 2020 and none thus far in 2021. The USA spoke to its Article X report [WP.1] submitted in 2020 which stated that it had spent over US\$100 billion on capacity building and advancement of the life sciences for peaceful uses. A number of speakers outlined national activities, such as Russia referring to the supply of pandemic vaccines and PCR tests, amongst other assistance.

Article X database – The ISU stated that 77 offers by 10 states parties and one group of states parties as well as 59 requests by 17 states parties were currently on the database. The Philippines provided a voluntary financial contribution this year for improvement of the database and Norway is to provide voluntary funds over three years for further improvements as part of a package to support Article X implementation through the ISU. The question was raised about how many requests on the database had been fulfilled which proved difficult to answer as many requests were quite general and a number had been partially fulfilled. There were suggestions that the database would work better if complemented by a cooperation officer in the ISU. Brazil indicated that a cooperation officer post should also be linked with the establishment of a cooperation committee, this connection was questioned by others.

Challenges and obstacles – The UK spoke to its paper [WP.2] on what constitutes assistance under Article X, including a history of how Article X was inserted into the Convention text as well as information on how assistance activities might be referred to in reporting under the Convention. Iran [WP.6] and Cuba [WP.7] spoke to their papers which both had at their core questions of ‘unilateral coercive measures’ (i.e., sanctions or embargoes). Iran suggested that the lack of an institutional mechanism to deal with relevant issues was at the core of the Article X challenges. Many speakers made references to repercussions of the pandemic with vaccine equity issues most explicitly addressed by Pakistan.

Mobilizing resources – Experts from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Mexico, Sri Lanka and Sudan had been sponsored to attend the MX though EU funding. The USA [WP.4] and Germany [WP.5] spoke to their papers that both dealt with pandemic response issues and lessons that could be learned for cooperation and assistance under the BWC. The USA noted that more rapid responses came from repurposing existing programmes than establishing new activities. Germany noted the benefits of earlier investment in preparedness as there was no time to build capabilities from scratch.

Training – MX1 heard from Mayra Ameneiros as a ‘Guest of the Meeting’ on her experiences in the ‘Youth for Biosecurity’ workshop during 2021 and related activities. Other speakers noted the importance of networking and identifying scientific and technological developments relevant to training under Article X.

Capacity building – France spoke to its paper [WP.3] that proposes the creation of a new platform called ‘SecBio’ which would include documentation and training materials in relation to biosecurity. This was the paper discussed at the greatest length during MX1. Many expressions of support for this exploratory proposal were made with a number of questions raised regarding responsibility for deciding what types of documents would be uploaded and who would assess materials designed for teaching and learning.

Collaboration with international or regional organizations or networks – The meeting received presentations from the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) and the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) on their activities. Other speakers referred to work with the European Union and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)

At a number of moments during MX1, points were raised about challenges of the terms ‘biosafety’ and ‘biosecurity’ – distinct terms in some languages but identical in others. The 2008 Meeting of States Parties reached a common understanding of these terms: ‘biosafety refers to principles, technologies, practices and measures implemented to prevent the accidental release of, or unintentional exposure to, biological agents and toxins, and biosecurity refers to the protection, control and accountability measures implemented to prevent the loss, theft, misuse, diversion or intentional release of biological agents and toxins and related resources as well as unauthorized access to, retention or transfer of such material’ (BWC/MSP/2008/5, para 20).

This is the sixth in a series of reports for the Meetings of Experts for the BWC which are scheduled to be held from 30 August to 8 September 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). 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, who is solely responsible for their contents. He can be contacted via <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.