BioWeapons Prevention Project

MX report #1

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The 2008 Meeting of Experts: Biosecurity and Education

The opening of the 2008 Meeting of Experts (MX) marks the second year of the second inter-sessional process for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC/BWC). The MX will be followed by a one-week Meeting of States Parties (MSP) in December. The BWPP daily reports from the 2006 Review Conference and the Meetings in 2007 are available via the BWPP website at <http://www.bwpp.org>.

The topics for discussion at the MX and MSP this year are 'National, regional and international measures to improve biosafety and biosecurity, including laboratory safety and security of pathogens and toxins' and 'Oversight, education, awareness raising, and adoption and/or development of codes of conduct with the aim of preventing misuse in the context of advances in bio-science and bio-technology research with the potential of use for purposes prohibited by the Convention'. The topics were agreed at the Sixth Review Conference for the BTWC which was held at the end of 2006. The MSP may also discuss 'universalisation and comprehensive implementation of the Convention'. Comprehensive implementation would include such topics as national implementation, scientific and technological developments, confidence-building measures (CBMs), and coordination with other international bodies.

By the weekend before the opening of the MX, 4 background papers by the BTWC's Implementation Support Unit (ISU) and 15 (out of at least 17 submitted) Working Papers by States Parties had been made public in electronic form. These can be found via the ISU website at <http://www.unog.ch/bwc> as well as via the dedicated BWPP web page for this MX at <http://www.bwpp.org/2008MX/MX2008Resources.html>.

Issues of biosafety and biosecurity

Safety and security of dangerous pathogens in all laboratories are important contributors to public protection. Similar issues were raised in the 2003 Meetings of Experts/States Parties when the topics for discussion included 'national mechanisms to establish and maintain the security and oversight of pathogenic microorganisms and toxins'.

There has been some difficulty with coming to clear and precise definitions of 'biosafety' and 'biosecurity', not least because in a number of languages these translate into the same term. One broad distinction between the two that has been generally accepted is that biosafety broadly deals with preventing the unintended release of dangerous materials from laboratories and laboratory equipment while biosecurity broadly deals with preventing the deliberate removal of dangerous materials from laboratories by persons who may use them for hostile purposes. Biosecurity has also had other meanings in other contexts.

Revelations earlier this month that Bruce Ivins, a civilian researcher in a US Army laboratory, is considered by the Federal Bureau of Investigation as the sole suspect in the investigation into the 2001 anthrax attacks that killed five people and left 17 injured, have prompted much attention on the issues relating to biosecurity. One notable issue is the

question of where the balance of risk lies in the increase in the numbers of scientists handling dangerous pathogens in the interest of 'biodefence' – a larger number of scientists may lead to a greater capability to respond to an attack and reduce its effects, yet, as illustrated by recent revelations, it may also increase the chances that those very scientists may make hostile use of their knowledge and access. It is clear that there is no international consensus on where this balance lies.

Issues of education and codes of conduct

Education and awareness raising for scientists involved in the life sciences are seen as important to help them understand the potential for hostile uses of their knowledge and research. These efforts include codes of conduct for the activities of the scientists themselves. Similar issues were raised in the 2005 Meetings of Experts/States Parties when the topics for discussion were 'the content, promulgation, and adoption of codes of conduct for scientists'.

While the inclusion of such measures in arms control efforts is often seen as a recent addition, the suggestion has been around for a considerable time. For example, Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Winiewicz addressed the Conference of the Committee on Disarmament at the time of the BTWC negotiations stating 'Another possible important administrative measure connected with the implementation of article 5 of the draft convention might be the inclusion in the textbooks of schools and universities dealing with chemistry and biology of a precise indication that the use of any chemical formula or any biological agent for any warlike purposes constitutes a violation of international law and will be prosecuted in accordance with the appropriate national legislation. Every individual must become aware of the danger represented by chemical and bacteriological (biological) weapons and must be prepared for some form of participation in the enforcement of the convention prohibiting the development and production of those inhuman means of warfare.' [CCD/PV. 464, 14 April 1970]

Recognizing that education and codes of conduct can have beneficial effects is just the first step. A number of States Parties will be outlining their experiences in education, oversight and awareness raising in the coming week.

Copeland Prize

On Wednesday 20 August 2008 a new initiative to raise awareness of the dangers of the misuse of the biological sciences in a way designed to appeal to the next generation of life science practitioners will be launched by the BWPP in association with the ISU. More details will be published in Thursday's daily report.

Progress on Universalization

The 2006 Review Conference took a decision on 'Promotion of Universalization' to encourage countries outside of the BTWC to join the Convention. At the time of that decision, the BTWC had 155 States Parties. Since the 2007 Meeting of States Parties, Zambia (15 January) and Madagascar (7 March) have acceded to the Convention and the United Arab Emirates (19 June) has ratified it, bringing the total of States Parties to 162.

This is the first report from the Meeting of Experts for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 18 to 22 August 2008 in Geneva. The reports are designed to help people who are not in Geneva to follow the proceedings.

The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) in co-operation with the Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy. Copies of these reports are available via <http://www.bwpp.org/2008MX/MX2008Resources.html> or <http://www.acronym.org.uk>.

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