

Monday 4th August 2014

The 2014 Meeting of Experts: setting the scene

The 2014 Meeting of Experts (MX) marks the crossing of the halfway point in the series of meetings in the third inter-sessional process for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC). The MX is the third of four in this inter-sessional process and will be followed by a Meeting of States Parties (MSP) to be held 1-5 December. These meetings are established by the five-yearly BWC Review Conferences, in this case by a decision adopted at the Seventh Review Conference in 2011. The inter-sessional meetings are intended to be practical and focused on promoting ideas and learning from experiences in order to develop common understandings and effective actions. The 2014 meetings will be chaired by Ambassador Urs Schmid of Switzerland, with two Vice-Chairs – Ambassador Mazlan Muhammad of Malaysia and Judit Körömi of Hungary, Special Representative of the Foreign Minister for Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation.

Topics under discussion during the 2014 meetings

The three on-going topics, also known as the standing agenda items, of the third inter-sessional process are ‘Cooperation and assistance, with a particular focus on strengthening cooperation and assistance under Article X’, ‘Review of developments in the field of science and technology related to the Convention’, and ‘Strengthening national implementation’. This year the meetings will also discuss ‘How to strengthen implementation of Article VII, including consideration of detailed procedures and mechanisms for the provision of assistance and cooperation by States Parties’, a new topic that will also be discussed in 2015.

BWC Article X relates to access to the life sciences for peaceful purposes. The renunciation of biological weapons and the control of the hostile uses of the life sciences have to be implemented so as not to hinder the use of the life sciences for peaceful purposes. Article X also provides ‘the right to participate in, the fullest possible exchange’ of materials and technologies ‘for the use of bacteriological (biological) agents and toxins for peaceful purposes’. Cooperation and assistance goes further than Article X and includes other aspects such as capacity building. There are many divergences of opinion relating to Article X issues.

Rapid advances in the life sciences mean that the BWC operates within a rapidly changing science and technology (S&T) context. This leads to changes in the nature of risks and threats the BWC may need to counter as well as providing new opportunities for peaceful uses. Understanding this changing context and taking note of new developments is seen by many as critical in ensuring efforts to control biological weapons are kept relevant and effective. This year there is a particular focus on ‘advances in the understanding of pathogenicity, virulence, toxicology, immunology and related issues’.

Improved national implementation of the BWC is seen as an important way of enhancing effectiveness of the overall regime to control biological weapons. Effective implementation in ways that are appropriate to national contexts has long been regarded as a significant challenge.

BWC Article VII deals with the provision of ‘assistance’ by States Parties if a State Party is ‘exposed to danger’ because of a breach of the Convention. No government is likely to have at its disposal the resources to respond to a severe biological attack and so the concept of receiving assistance applies to all countries. The 2006 Review Conference Final Document included language for the first time addressing one of the perceived weaknesses of the text of the Convention — that a relevant danger must come from a State Party to the Convention — by introducing language in referring to dangers from ‘anyone other than States Parties’, which would include non-states parties as well as non-state entities. The same language was included in 2011.

Implementation Support Unit staffing changes

The Implementation Support Unit (ISU) is the body established by each of the last two BWC Review Conferences to support States Parties by carrying out a variety of functions such as administrative support for BWC meetings, national implementation support, and the exchange of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs).

In February 2014, Richard Lennane, the Head of the ISU, announced he would be leaving the ISU to pursue other opportunities; he is now working with the Geneva Nuclear Disarmament Initiative (also known as ‘Wildfire’). In a note from the ISU on 15 May BWC States Parties were informed that Gabriele Kraatz-Wadsack, Principal Political Affairs Officer at the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, would temporarily assume the functions of the ISU Head. This note also carried the news that Piers Millett, Political Affairs Officer, would be resigning. The appointments process is underway for these two positions but neither post will be filled before the MX. It was not possible for Piers Millett to apply for the post of ISU Head while an ISU employee and he will be attending the MX as an advisor to the Chair.

Preparations for the MX

Four background papers by the ISU and five Working Papers by States Parties had been issued as formal MX documents by the end of the week before the meeting. These, and a further three working papers, had been issued as ‘advance versions’ prior to being typeset as official documents. The advance release of papers allows for their contents to be considered before start of the MX. There is also a ‘non-paper’ from France. These papers can be found via the ISU website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>; official documents can also be found via the UN documents server <<http://documents.un.org>>. Reference numbers for the official documents for this meeting all start BWC/MSP/2014/MX/, so the provisional agenda for the meeting is published as BWC/MSP/2014/MX/1 and the provisional programme of work as BWC/MSP/2014/MX/2. Additional papers are likely to be issued.

About these reports

Starting from the Sixth Review Conference in 2006, the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) has produced daily reports from each of the BWC meetings. The reports were initially designed to help people who were not in Geneva to follow the proceedings but are now also widely circulated each morning amongst delegates. Six reports will be produced during this MX, starting with this setting the scene report. A report will be produced covering each day’s activities, the last of which will be circulated electronically after the MX has concluded. If you would like to be added to the mailing list please contact the author via the details given at the bottom of this page. The BWPP daily reports from the 2006 and 2011 Review Conferences, as well as those from the annual meetings in between and after, are available via the BWPP website at <<http://www.bwpp.org>>.

This is the first report from the Meeting of Experts for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 4 to 8 August 2014 in Geneva.

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