

Wednesday 15th July 2020

Implications of the pandemic for the practicalities of BWC meetings

The schedule for the 2020 annual meetings of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC), as agreed in 2017, was for a series of five Meetings of Experts (MXs) held back-to-back during 25 August–3 September and a Meeting of States Parties (MSP) during 8–11 December. As a number of other international meetings have already been postponed or adapted owing to the pandemic, it is probable that the BWC meetings will be impacted in similar ways.

Practicalities of holding BWC meetings under current pandemic restrictions

Some meetings have restarted in the Palais des Nations in Geneva with physical distancing rules that significantly limit the numbers able to attend. The largest conference rooms now have a capacity of roughly 100 people with a limitation of one person per delegation. The current pandemic restrictions in Switzerland limit travel from most countries. Room capacity and travel restrictions would impact upon civil society participation as well as that of national delegations. In addition, many individuals that would usually provide inputs into the BWC meetings are currently assigned to COVID-19 related duties. As many countries have limited numbers of available personnel with relevant skill sets, attendance at BWC meetings would represent a significant opportunity cost in relation to pandemic response.

There are challenges to how the existing pattern of work of the MXs could continue with COVID-19 restrictions in place. Some aspects, such as exchange of ideas through working papers, are easy to replicate in virtual settings; others, such as the less formal interactions that allow exchanges of experiences, are harder. There are a number of aspects of virtual meetings to be considered. Virtual participation requires more than just a one-way webcast, it requires the ability to interact. As the BWC is a global treaty, virtual participants would be spread across all time zones, making it difficult for some to be involved in a full day of activity based on Geneva time. Widely available systems for virtual participation have some limitations such as being unable to carry simultaneous interpretation, leading to meetings using these being held predominantly in English. Operating in only one language disadvantages some delegates as well as going against previously agreed policies within the UN system for promoting multilingualism. New software platforms that can accommodate simultaneous interpretation are being explored and procured across the UN system.

Potential consequences of postponing the 2020 BWC meetings

Opportunities exist for postponement of some BWC activities either to later in 2020 or into 2021. For example, some MX activities might be added as extra days to the session of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) for the Ninth Review Conference scheduled to consider substantive issues during August 2021. However, there are planned construction works at the Palais des Nations that will start later this year and continue beyond 2021. These works will reduce available conference room space while they are being carried out. This was part of the reason why the [2019 BWC MSP](#) had to take some decisions in

relation to the Ninth Review Conference. Meetings of other disarmament forums have already been postponed from the middle of this year to the end, one example being the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) meeting of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) has been postponed from mid August to early November, to the week before the annual CCW meeting.

Even before the pandemic, 2021 was a crowded year for arms control and disarmament meetings including Review Conferences for the BWC and the CCW. With meetings already being added into the proposed schedule for 2021, such as the Review Conference for the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) postponed from April/May of this year, the number of available slots to add further meetings is becoming limited. Moreover, each of these meetings is not a stand-alone event and requires substantial preparation and follow-up. Not only does this put significant pressure on available personnel, but also on travel budgets to support attendance at inter-governmental meetings. Indeed, some governments with more limited resources are realising difficult choices may have to be made about the level of attendance they can support at each meeting with so many now scheduled for 2021.

In any discussion of postponement, consideration should be given to decisions that would normally be taken during the MSP in the year before a Review Conference such as the selection of a President-designate. There are implications for the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) if pandemic impacts were to prevent the Ninth Review Conference from being convened in 2021. The [Eighth Review Conference](#) (2016) decided to renew the mandate of the ISU ‘for the period from 2017 to 2021’. Postponements of meetings from 2020 that might have a knock-on effect of moving some others scheduled for 2021 to the following year should take this into account.

Pandemic impacts on the scope of future discussions within the BWC

The next report in this series will examine how experience of the pandemic might impact on specific topics in the run up to the Ninth Review Conference and how this might influence any future programme of work to come out of it.

The pandemic has focused attention on infectious disease issues across governments. This can only help cross-government awareness of the challenges that infectious disease can have on modern societies and ease bringing departments that previously had given little consideration to infectious disease issues into planning for responses to deliberate disease. Part of this increased awareness has included a greater understanding of ‘One Health’ concepts – bringing together policies relating to disease in humans, animals and plants. While much of the focus in BWC meetings has been on the use of disease as a weapon in humans, the Convention also covers the deliberate use of disease in animals and plants – aspects that have particular importance for agriculture and issues around security of supply of food.

Record numbers of daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases have been reported this week. A number of governments have already started examining how their national systems have responded to the pandemic and there is a greater awareness of the importance of preparedness. This may bring with it a renewed willingness to spend time on considering responses to reduce the impacts of potential biological attacks.

The potential negative impacts of resource issues on future BWC discussions are discussed above. Reduced availability of some delegates may also have an impact on the breadth of the agenda agreed for the Ninth Review Conference and beyond.

This is the sixth in a series of reports looking at the impacts relating to the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to the BWC published by the [BioWeapons Prevention Project \(BWPP\)](#), a global network of civil society actors dedicated to the permanent elimination of biological weapons and of the possibility of their re-emergence. These reports follow the style of the daily reports that have been produced for all BWC meetings since the Sixth Review Conference in 2006 and are posted to <http://www.bwpp.org/covid.html> where links can be found to background materials that readers may find useful as well as to an email subscription link. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie, [CBW Events](#), who is solely responsible for their contents. The author can be contacted via richard@cbw-events.org.uk. Financial support for these reports has been gratefully received from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Ireland.