

Thursday 4th December 2008

## The Third Day: Completion of Topical Sessions

The 2008 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) continued on Wednesday morning with agenda item 6 – ‘Consideration of national, regional and international measures to improve biosafety and biosecurity, including laboratory safety and security of pathogens and toxins’ before moving onto discussion of agenda item 7 – ‘Consideration of 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 meeting also heard remarks from the Chairman, Ambassador Georgi Avramchev (The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), on a biosecurity meeting he attended and received presentations on synthetic biology.

Wednesday saw the end of the sessions dedicated to the specific topics allocated to this year’s meetings and the rest of the MSP will be dedicated to discussion of such matters as universalization activities and the report of the Implementation Support Unit. The MSP will also need to draft its own final report (the uncontroversial draft procedural paragraphs of which were circulated on Wednesday).

About 40-50 per cent of the Wednesday sessions, as measured in time passed, were held as open meetings, and the open hours form the bulk of reporting here.

### **NSABB meeting**

At the start of the morning session, the Chairman described his participation in a meeting entitled ‘Sustaining Progress in the Life Sciences: Strategies for Managing Dual Use Areas of Concern’, that was held in Bethesda, Maryland, USA during 5-7 November. Over 130 participants drawn from 72 organizations in 37 countries had been involved in the meeting which was hosted by the US National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity (NSABB).

Amongst other things, the meeting heard calls for a richer life-cycle review process for science, covering legal, ethical, safety and security aspects. A report of the meeting is to be published in due course and will be made available on the NSABB website <<http://oba.od.nih.gov/biosecurity/>>.

### **Biosafety and biosecurity discussions**

The United States then gave its presentation on the Biosecurity Engagement Program (BEP) which had been held over from Tuesday. Had the presentation been given the day before it would have been done in closed session, but on Wednesday morning it was open.

The BEP was described as aiming at long-lasting collaborations that improve the safety and security of capacity and infrastructure within a number of countries. The US

indicated it is currently engaged with over 40 countries in its efforts to enhance biosecurity. More information about the BEP can be found at <<http://www.bepstate.net>>.

### **Synthetic biology presentations**

Using the same procedure for suspending the meeting that allowed NGOs to address delegates on Monday, two presentations were given informally on the subject of synthetic biology. Stephen Maurer, of the Goldman School of Public Policy, University of California, Berkeley, spoke on 'Grassroots Biosecurity Initiatives' and Markus Fischer spoke about the 'Industry Association Synthetic Biology' (IASB), a collaboration between five German companies that is now recruiting new members internationally. A number of issues emerged during the presentations and the subsequent discussions.

The ability to cheaply purchase long sequences of DNA from production companies that previously would have been costly and labour intensive creates a situation where new abuses of the life sciences are possible. Most production companies will check sequences ordered against databases of known harmful sequences, such as those that come from lethal viruses and one of the leading databases for this is now available for free. Questions remain about which sequences should be tested for and how any international standards for this might develop. Most companies already screen orders, not least to ensure safe handling of sequences as they are produced. A draft code of conduct for production companies has been drafted and will be circulated to the MSP as a working paper. More information on the IASB can be found at <<http://www.ia-sb.eu>>.

### **Education and Codes of Conduct**

The MSP moved into closed session around noon for agenda item 7 and continued on this topic into the afternoon. The topic was broken down into three themes for the Programme of Work – 'Oversight of science', 'Education and awareness raising', 'Codes of conduct' – although most presentations seemed to contain elements of all three.

There appeared to be little of substance in this discussion that had not been raised during the Meeting of Experts in August.

### **Side Events**

An 'International Panel on Biosecurity Education' was held before the morning session, jointly convened by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the Landau Network-Centro Volta (LNCV) and the University of Bradford Disarmament Research Centre (BDRC). The meeting was chaired by Maurizio Martellini (LNCV) and presentations were heard from Giulio Mancini (LNCV) and James Revill (BDRC) entitled 'Project on Biosecurity Education in Europe', Jennifer Sta.Ana (AAAS) on 'Professional and Graduate-Level Programs on Dual Research and Biosecurity in the US', and Simon Whitby (BDRC) on 'Developing Biosecurity Education Materials'.

A lunchtime seminar by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) that was advertised some time ago did not take place. It was unfortunate that a lunchtime slot had been reserved without being used as many people had been unable to attend the morning seminar owing to other commitments at that time.

*This is the fourth report from the Meeting of States Parties for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 1 to 5 December 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 Verification Research, Training and Information Centre (VERTIC). Copies are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/2008MSP/MSP2008Resources.html>>.*

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