

Tuesday 7th August 2018

The 2018 Meetings of Experts: continuity and change

The 2018 Meetings of Experts (MXs) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) are a continuation of work programmes that were first established in 2002; at the same time they represent a significant change in structure.

This series of meetings is the most recent iteration of work programmes held between the five-yearly Review Conferences of the Convention that are commonly known as the 'inter-sessional process'. The Eighth BWC Review Conference in 2016 was unable to agree on the contents of a new inter-sessional process but was able to agree to delegate further discussion on what might be in such a process to the Meeting of States Parties (MSP) held in December 2017. The 2017 MSP agreed to the holding of five distinct MXs in each of 2018, 2019 and 2020. Each year would also include a week-long MSP towards the end of the calendar year. The Chair of the 2018 MSP has been confirmed as Ljupčo Jivan Gjorgjinski (former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).

In summary, the MXs and their topics, as agreed by the 2017 MSP, and the Chairs appointed through subsequent consultations are:

- MX1 – 7-8 August (Tuesday-Wednesday) Cooperation and Assistance, with a Particular Focus on Strengthening Cooperation and Assistance under Article X – Ambassador Maria Teresa Almojuela (Philippines)
- MX2 – 9-10 August (Thursday-Friday) MX2 - Review of Developments in the Field of Science and Technology Related to the Convention – [Chair to be announced]
- MX3 – 13 August (Monday) Strengthening National Implementation – Ambassador Julio Herráiz España (Spain)
- MX4 – 14-15 August (Tuesday-Wednesday) Assistance, Response and Preparedness – Daniel Nord (Sweden)
- MX5 – 16 August (Thursday) Institutional Strengthening of the Convention – Otakar Gorgol (Czech Republic)

Changes from earlier Meetings of Experts

As each meeting is a stand-alone activity with a different occupant in the Chair, each meeting needs to have its own opening formalities, such as adoption of its agenda and decisions on participation, and its own adoption of a report.

As each MX is so short, being only one or two days long, there is no chance for the traditional general debate that would take up much of the first day, or sometimes longer, of the five- or ten-day MXs of earlier inter-sessional processes. As one part of the general debate has been to include a chance for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to give statements in an informal arrangement, a knock-on effect of the lack of a general debate is the loss of this opportunity for NGOs to address the MXs. Consultations to find another way for NGOs to be able to offer their perspectives are ongoing. For the first time, a joint NGO position paper has been put together which will be circulated to delegates in hard copy and has been placed on the BWC website (see below).

The official reports from each of the MXs are expected to be essentially procedural as the purpose of the MXs are to exchange ideas, innovations and perspectives

rather than reach consensus positions. Hence, there is little more to report each time other than the procedural aspects of each MX. The inter-sessional meetings are intended to be practical and focused on promoting ideas and learning from experiences in order to develop common understanding and effective action. The MSP, scheduled for December 2018, is expected to produce a report in line with previous practice.

A further innovation is the intention to have the MXs livestreamed via the UN Web TV service <<http://webtv.un.org/>>. While live coverage has been tried on occasions in the past, with some technical difficulties, this is the first use by the BWC of the UN system.

Topics under discussion during MX1

The overarching topic for MX1 is ‘Cooperation and assistance, with a particular focus on strengthening cooperation and assistance under Article X’. Article X of the BWC is about 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 that they do not 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, including other aspects such as capacity building, and so MX1 will be discussing a number of sub-topics such as identification of challenges and obstacles to cooperation and assistance and how to overcome them; and reviewing the report of the database on assistance and cooperation put together by the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU). MX1 will also consider reports provided by states parties of their activities in support of Article X.

MX documentation and printed information

A number of working papers have already been issued as formal MX documents. Further papers have been issued as ‘advance versions’ prior to being typeset as official documents. Additional papers are likely to be issued. These papers, together with statements and presentations made within the MXs and letters from the Chairs of the MXs, can be found via the BWC ISU website – the page for the latest set of meetings is linked from <<https://www.unog.ch/bwc/meeting>>; official documents can also be found via the UN documents server <<http://documents.un.org>>. Official document references for MX1 all start BWC/MSP/2018/MX.1/, for MX2, BWC/MSP/2018/MX.2/, and so forth. At the time of writing, eight MX1 working papers were available as official documents, with one other available as an advance version.

The ISU has prepared a background information document for each of the MXs which includes details of provisions within the Convention text relating to the topics under discussion, understandings reached by Review Conferences and by meetings in previous inter-sessional programmes, and relevant ISU activities.

BWC membership

At the 2017 MSP, membership of the BWC stood at 179. On 9 January 2018 the State of Palestine deposited its instrument of accession to the BWC with the relevant authorities in Moscow and London, becoming the 180th member. On 14 June 2018 Niue deposited its instrument of accession to the BWC with the relevant authorities in Washington, DC, becoming the 181st member. Universal membership of the Convention is a long-established aspiration and a number of activities have taken place since the 2017 MSP, such as regional workshops, to encourage and assist states that are not yet members to join.

This is the first report from the series of five Meetings of Experts for the BWC which are being held from 7 to 16 August 2018 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.

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