

Thursday 16th August 2018

MX4 concludes on responses to disease, a look to MX5

On Wednesday, the fourth in the series of 2018 Meetings of Experts (MXs) under the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) concluded its examination of the topic of ‘Assistance, Response and Preparedness’.

As has been set by precedent in the earlier MXs, the draft report was circulated just before the lunch break and adopted after the substantive discussions were concluded in the afternoon.

Mobile labs and response teams

A major part of the discussion during the morning focused on mobile biomedical laboratories and rapid response teams that could be deployed to areas where there were outbreaks of disease. As with discussion on Tuesday, many aspects of commonality of capacities for natural and deliberate disease outbreaks were highlighted, alongside recognition of responses through other channels, such as the International Health Regulations which entered into force in 2007.

Russia spoke to its paper (WP.1) about mobile biomedical laboratories, a subject on which it has had a continuing focus and about which it has produced three previous working papers, with the concept being developed further each time. A number of countries described experiences of their mobile labs, for example Belgium and India. Germany noted that its experience with Bundeswehr mobile labs had contributed to the development of EU civil mobile labs. It was not clear overall how many countries had offerable mobile laboratory capacities and the suggestion that an Article VII database could contain details of these received support from a number of delegations. There was a general recognition that mobile labs would contribute to any response effort, but how they would fit in required further discussion, especially where labs from different countries were operating together. It was suggested that the potential for smooth interoperability would be enhanced by regular exercises.

The UK spoke to its paper (WP.2) on a ‘Public Health Rapid Support Team’ (UK-PHRST), deployable at short notice, which became operational in November 2016. The flexibility of modes of deployment was highlighted with an example given of the team going to a country to contribute to cholera surveillance in circumstances where an outbreak might have been expected and when the outbreak did not occur, the team switched its activities to train local staff. Other delegations noted related capacities in their countries, for example, the USA outlined the work of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It was recognized that deployable response teams and laboratories work most effectively when they work in concert with local capacities. Australia spoke to a paper (WP.6) on its Health Security Initiative, noting that effective protection against infectious disease relies on robust and functional public health surveillance and laboratory systems and these, in turn, are reliant on a sufficient and appropriately trained work force. The initiative aims to enhance these fundamental capacities in the Asia-Pacific region.

A BWC ‘Mechanism’ for Article VII

During MX4 there have been many references suggesting that improved implementation of the Convention requires an Article VII mechanism. However, there seems to be differences of perspective of what constitutes such a mechanism. In discussion of procedures for handling requests for assistance there have been clear suggestions of a decision-making mechanism to decide assistance that is outwith the UN Security Council. In other interventions, delegates have referred to an Article VII mechanism as a wider set of arrangements within the BWC to support countries under attack. Paragraph 47 of the consensus report of the 2015 Meeting of States Parties (BWC/MSP/2015/6) includes a list of proposals that could contribute to an Article VII mechanism.

Animal and plant diseases – ‘one health’

During the afternoon, the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) introduced its Guidelines for Investigation of Suspicious Biological Events. Brazil noted the economic as well as human costs of infectious diseases in agriculture. Reference was made to the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease in the UK in 2001 which had widespread impacts, including on tourism. There was recognition of the synergies of steps to reduce biological threats to humans, animals and plants as in the ‘one health’ concept.

MX 3 and MX4 reflections

Both of these meetings were very active. There was particularly productive discussion in MX4 on the Article VII database and on guidelines for implementation of Article VII, but there is little clarity on how to turn these positive discussions into actual results. Just as the MSP in 2017 took decisions on a delegated mandate from the Eighth Review Conference to establish the current inter-sessional work programme, the MSP in 2018 could be considered the correct forum to start the process of turning the decision in principle at the Review Conference to establish an Article VII database into a practical reality.

Preparations for MX5

The last in the series of MXs for 2018 will be MX5 on Thursday, for which the overarching topic is ‘Institutional Strengthening of the Convention’ with just 1 sub-topic: ‘Consideration of the full range of approaches and options to further strengthen the Convention and its functioning, through possible additional legal measures or other measures, in the framework of the Convention.’. This will be the second of the one-day MXs. This topic has not been previously on the agendas of any of the earlier inter-sessional meetings. At the time of writing, three MX5 working papers were available as official documents. There is also an ISU background information document.

Side events

There were two side events on Wednesday. One, before the start of proceedings, entitled ‘Civil Society tools and events to advance preparedness and response to deliberate biological events’, was convened by Georgetown University and NTI. One was held at lunchtime, convened by the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security on ‘Clade X: A Pandemic Exercise’.

***NOTE: There will be an additional MX report covering MX5.
This will be published next week and will be posted at the web locations given below.***

This is the eighth report from the series of five BWC Meetings of Experts which are being held from 7 to 16 August 2018 in Geneva. Reports are posted to <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>> and <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>>. An email subscription link is available on each page.

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