

Monday 10th December 2012

The 2012 Meeting of States Parties: setting the scene

The 2012 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) is part of the third inter-sessional process for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC). The MSP was preceded by a week-long Meeting of Experts (MX) held in July. The third inter-sessional process covers the period 2012 through 2015 and was agreed at the Seventh BWC Review Conference held in December 2011. The Conference decided that this set of annual meetings would discuss three on-going topics as well as specific topics in particular years.

The 2012 meetings are chaired by Ambassador Boujemâa Delmi of Algeria (who replaced Ambassador Idriss Jazaïry from April), assisted by two Vice-Chairs – Dr Cezary Lusinski of Poland and Ambassador Urs Schmid of Switzerland (who replaced Ambassador Alexandre Fasel from October).

Topics under discussion

The three on-going topics, 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’. In 2012 and 2013 the meetings will also discuss ‘How to enable fuller participation in the CBMs’. In a letter dated 21 June, the Chair proposed a breakdown of sub-topics under each of the topics that might be focused on in each year. The MSP will also discuss progress toward universalization and the annual report of the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU).

Article X covers the issue of access to the life sciences for peaceful purposes of the Convention and is seen as part of a bargain in which the renunciation of biological weapons and the control of the hostile uses of the life sciences have to be implemented in such a way as not to hinder the use of the life sciences for peaceful purposes. There remain divergences of opinion between States Parties relating to Article X. Cooperation and assistance goes further than Article X and includes related aspects such as capacity building. The changing science and technology context, and in particular the rapid advances in the life sciences, leads to changes in the nature of risks and threats the regime may need to counter, as well as providing new opportunities for peaceful uses. Improved national implementation of the provisions of the BWC in ways that are appropriate to national contexts has long been seen as an important way of enhancing effectiveness of the overall regime to control biological weapons. The system of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) under the Convention provides for returns to be submitted by States Parties on certain relevant activities and facilities. While numbers of returns have risen over the years, there has been wide recognition that participation in CBMs could be improved further.

Preparations for the MSP

A number of papers from States Parties, together with the Chair's Synthesis Paper summarizing ideas raised at the MX, have been circulated as formal documents prior to the

opening of the MSP. The Working Papers circulated thus far are: WP.1 Next steps on the CBMs (UK); WP.2 Life scientists in the effective implementation of the BWC (Poland); WP.3 Bio-transparency and Openness Initiative (USA); WP.4 Awareness of the dual-use challenge for life scientists (Canada); WP.5 National implementation measures (Iraq); WP.6 Compliance assessment update (Canada, Czech Republic and Switzerland); WP.7 The inter-sessional process (South Africa); and WP.8 ASEAN Regional Forum workshops (Australia, Philippines and USA). An information paper from Canada on its activities under Article X has also been circulated. These papers had previously 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 MSP.

The ISU annual report has been published which includes details of national contact points and CBM participation. As of 7 November, 66 States Parties had provided CBM returns this year, compared with 69 returns for the whole of 2011. Of the submitted CBMs this year, 21 have been made public at the request of the submitting States Parties.

Also circulated prior to the MSP is the annual report on activities to promote universality. This report was prepared just before the announcement of the deposit of the instrument of accession by the Marshall Islands in November, bringing the number of States Parties up to 166.

All 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 official documents for this meeting all start BWC/MSP/2012/). Additional papers are likely to be issued during the MSP.

The third inter-sessional process – a developing format

The annual BWC meetings have developed in format and style since the first inter-sessional process started in 2003. Some observers have expressed frustration that the 2012 MX was not as productive as had been hoped. However, there were a number of particular circumstances within which the MX took place, including competing meetings that needed attention from delegates who would normally be involved with the BWC. It should be noted that the first year of meetings in each of the previous inter-sessional processes has been different in character from the rest as new working methods evolved.

As with earlier meetings, there will be a number of side events. While the side events have traditionally been held by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), there has been a trend for other bodies, for example governments and inter-governmental organizations, to make use of these opportunities as well. During the MX there were desires expressed by a number of delegates to import the vitality of the side events into the main meeting room. This has also been raised in the Working Paper from South Africa.

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 MSP, 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 MSP has concluded.

This is the first report from the Meeting of States Parties for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 10 to 14 December 2012 in Geneva. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). Copies of these reports, starting from 2006, are available via the BWPP website at <<http://www.bwpp.org>>.

The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) who can be contacted during the Meeting of Experts relating to these reports on +41 76 507 1026 or <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.