

Wednesday 11th December 2013

The second day: cooperation & assistance and science & technology

Opening of the meeting

The 2013 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) was continued on Tuesday with its first working sessions on the standing agenda items. The morning was dedicated to agenda item 7 'Cooperation and assistance, with a particular focus on strengthening cooperation and assistance under Article X' with the afternoon to agenda item 8 'Review of developments in the field of science and technology related to the Convention'. At the opening of the meeting the Chair, Judit Körömi, offered an apology that time had not allowed for the NGO statements to be heard in full the previous day. Before the morning's proceedings on the scheduled agenda item started, the delegation of Ukraine took the floor to give a general debate statement.

Cooperation and assistance

Prepared statements or presentations under this agenda item were given by: the Implementation Support Unit (ISU), Malaysia, Iraq, Iran (for the non-aligned), UK, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Cuba, European Union, Netherlands, Mexico, Japan, Russia, Canada, India, Brazil, Germany, Switzerland, USA and Pakistan. A discussion on the issues raised had contributions from Algeria, UK, USA, Iran, the ISU and South Africa.

The ISU made a presentation on the operation of the cooperation and assistance database established as a decision of the Seventh BWC Review Conference. The database currently has 2 entries for requests for assistance from 2 States Parties (Afghanistan and Iraq) and 23 offers of assistance in various areas from 5 States Parties (Canada, France, Germany, UK and USA). A number of interventions made direct reference to this database and issues of how it might be improved. There were suggestions from some delegations that the difficulties with the database illustrated the need for an Article X implementation mechanism – a long-standing policy objective of the non-aligned states which called again for the 'full, effective and non-discriminatory implementation of Article X'. Others wanted to investigate why the database had not yet proved as successful as hoped and what might be needed to enhance its effectiveness. A suggestion made during the August Meeting of Experts that parts of the database, and in particular the offers, be made public was repeated. It was also suggested that the ISU should be more active in promoting the database.

A number of delegations spoke to specific projects or events; there is space to give only a few examples here. Georgia referred to a regional workshop will be held next week at its Center for Public Health Research with Kazakh, Armenian, Azerbaijani and Russian specialists taking part. The Netherlands noted it was collaborating on several projects in the field of biosecurity in Uganda. Russia spoke of its Special Anti-Epidemic Teams that can be deployed in other countries to help combat infectious disease.

There were suggestions that barriers to trade in biological materials were contrary to the BWC. Others suggested that only proportionate measures were implemented to prevent misuse. India noted the difficulty of access to medical products on grounds of costs.

Science and technology

The afternoon session was chaired by Vice-Chair Urs Schmid of Switzerland. The opening presentation of this session was given by Stefan Mogl as a member of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) Temporary Working Group (TWG) on Convergence in Chemistry and Biology. Statements or presentations under this agenda item were given by: Iran (for the non-aligned), UK, Brazil, Japan, Poland, Netherlands, Switzerland, Canada, Mexico, India, Cuba, France, Sweden, USA, Pakistan, Australia and China. The overarching theme of the session was the balance of benefits and risks that follow on from advances in the life sciences.

Many positive and negative aspects of scientific and technical developments were identified. It was noted that many individual developments carry both benefits and risks. As a simple example, techniques to store viable biological materials for longer periods makes certain medical treatments more accessible, but also allow for storage of agents for misuse.

A number of delegations referred to a cross-regional 'food for thought' working paper with numerous sponsors entitled 'Addressing modern threats in the Biological Weapons Convention'. This paper is expected to be published in the next day or so. As of Tuesday night, the co-sponsors for this were Australia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Czech Republic, Finland, Ghana, Lithuania, Netherlands, Nigeria, Philippines, Republic of Korea and Sweden.

During the morning there had been considerable emphasis that vaccine production was critical for public health. Preventable infectious diseases kill millions each year and any hindrance on vaccine production would have a cost measured in human lives. There were divergent views on the significance for the BWC of vaccine production facilities. It is clear that further discussion would have to be held on this particular issue before a common understanding could be reached. As noted in the room, vaccine production facilities have been considered BWC relevant in earlier proceedings, hence their inclusion in the Confidence-Building Measures system.

The Netherlands noted there would be lessons learned from its experience regarding H5N1 influenza research. Switzerland, speaking to WP.5, suggested that while the arrangements within the current inter-sessional process were an improvement over past practice for on-going review of science and technology issues, there was a need for a new structure or arrangement to allow for systematic and comprehensive review.

Side events

A breakfast side event was convened on the theme of 'Consolidating Biosecurity Education'. Presentations were given by Tatyana Novosiolova, Landau Network Centro Volta, on 'Teaching biosecurity to neuroscientists'; Brian Rappert, University of Exeter, on 'On the dual uses of science and ethics'; Jo Husbands, member of the OPCW SAB TWG on Outreach and Education on activities in the group; and Ryszard Slominski, Polish Academy of Sciences on 'Promoting education about dual use issues in the life sciences'. The event was chaired by Wojciech Flera, Deputy Permanent Representative of Poland.

A lunchtime event was convened by France entitled 'EU NRBC Action Plan: How the exchange of good practices can improve the surveillance of high risk pathogens'. Presentations were given by Christophe Genisset, General Secretariat for Defense and National Security, France; Saskia Rutjes, National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, the Netherlands; and Bjarke Kirkemann, Centre for Biosecurity and Biopreparedness, Denmark on biosafety and biosecurity in their countries. The first presentation also included background on the Action Plan. The event was chaired by Ambassador Jean-Hugues Simon-Michel of France.

This is the third report from the Meeting of States Parties for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 9 to 13 December 2013 in Geneva. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). The reports are available via the BWPP website at <<http://www.bwpp.org>>. The author can be contacted during the Meeting of States Parties on +41 76 507 1026 or <richard@cbw-events.org>.