

Monday 25th August 2008

The 2008 Meeting of Experts: The Final Day

The 2008 Meeting of Experts (MX) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC/BWC) concluded on Friday. A procedural report was adopted, together with a compilation of ‘Considerations, Lessons, Perspectives, Recommendations, Conclusions and Proposals Drawn From the Presentations, Statements, Working Papers and Interventions on the Topics Under Discussion at the Meeting’. The format of the report and of the compilation follow the pattern of earlier MXs. The intention of the compilation is to summarize the ideas raised at the Meeting in order to help officials from States Parties consider which of them might be relevant for them in their own circumstances. This is both the greatest strength and greatest weakness of the inter-sessional process – ideas can be raised that States Parties can accept or reject as they see fit, without any kind of decision-making process at the meetings which might recommend that particular measures should be adopted by all States Parties.

The morning started with the last presentations on the second topic of this year’s MX – ‘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’. Presentations were made on the themes of ‘education and awareness’ and ‘codes of conduct’. Presentations (in the following sequence) were heard from Australia, Argentina, India, Georgia, Pakistan on the theme of ‘education and awareness’, and from Australia, Netherlands, United States, Ukraine, China, Bulgaria, Brazil, the Republic of Korea and Sweden on the theme of ‘codes of conduct’. The meeting then broke for lunch.

Universalization report

Just before the adoption of the report from the MX, the Chairman, Ambassador Georgi Avramchev (The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), gave an interim report on progress towards universalization of the Convention and noted the three new States Parties so far this year – Zambia, Madagascar and the United Arab Emirates. He indicated that Cameroon (which had participated in the MX) and Mozambique were well advanced in their preparations for becoming States Parties to the BTWC and noted that Myanmar, Nepal, Comoros and Côte d’Ivoire were also known to have made some progress in their preparations. Ambassador Avramchev urged States Parties to coordinate their efforts to encourage universalization and to inform the Implementation Support Unit of contacts they have with relevant countries.

The Chairman’s formal report on universalization will be given at the Meeting of States Parties in December.

Side Event

Friday's lunchtime seminar was convened by Verification Research Training and Information Centre (VERTIC) on its *National Implementing Measures for Effective Biosafety and Biosecurity* project. It was introduced by VERTIC's director, Angela Woodward. The seminar heard from representatives from the governments funding this project, Ambassador Johannes Landman (Netherlands) and Jacqueline Daley (United Kingdom). A detailed presentation on the current and future activities of this project was given by Scott Spence, VERTIC's CBW legal officer. Further details of the project can be found at <<http://www.vertic.org/NIM>>.

Reflections

A conscious effort is taken in writing these daily summaries to report the facts and not give opinion. However, there are many times that the question is raised – 'so what do you think about what happened?' The following are some personal reflections that do not necessarily represent anyone's views other than the author's own.

The Meeting of Experts was undoubtedly a success within the terms of its remit, giving plenty to build upon at the Meeting of States Parties in December. The flipside of this is a slight frustration at the limited mandate from the Sixth Review Conference in 2006 – much more could have been done, had it been allowed to be done.

In 2008 there was much more openness of information, possibly owing to the subject matter involved in these meetings. However, this is what was said about the subject matter in 2007. In 2008 there was not a single working session that was held behind closed doors – unprecedented in the BTWC inter-sessional process. Hopefully the experience of this MX will set a useful precedent as it would seem apparent that there have been no negative consequences to any State Party or NGOs seeing all of the working session presentations. The subject matter for next year, which includes 'enhancing international cooperation, assistance and exchange in biological sciences and technology for peaceful purposes' and 'promoting capacity building in the fields of disease surveillance, detection, diagnosis, and containment of infectious diseases', should also be conducive to this level of openness.

There has been much more detailed information given in statements – by States Parties as well as by other participants, including NGOs. One of the frustrations of the past was the lack of details and of concrete ideas or experiences being communicated at meetings – many statements were simply too general to be of use to others. This meeting benefited considerably from this additional level of detail.

This meeting continued the innovative nature of the renewed inter-sessional process. The roundtable/panel discussions followed the precedent set last year, although one of the panels this year may have been too detailed. This year's innovation of the poster sessions were an unqualified success with perhaps the only difficulty being a lack of time for interested delegates to be able to examine all of the posters in detail.

This is the sixth and final report from the Meeting of Experts for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 18 to 22 August 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 Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy. Copies of these reports are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/2008MX/MX2008Resources.html>> or <<http://www.acronym.org.uk>>.

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The author thanks all those that have made it possible to keep ahead of the deadline each morning to get paper copies to the Palais des Nations in time before the start of the meetings. Melanie Grover helped with copying and distribution. Kathryn McLaughlin helped with editing. Former BWPP stalwart Jean Pascal Zanders helped with keeping the web site up to date.