BioWeapons Prevention Project

MX report #6

Monday 31st August 2009

The Final Day: closure and reflections

The final day of the 2009 Meeting of Experts (MX) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) opened on Friday morning with Ambassador Marius Grinius of Canada in the Chair for a short formal session to wrap up the week's proceedings. A report of the Meeting was adopted (with the same text that had been circulated as a draft on Thursday afternoon) which is essentially procedural – noting the decision of the Review Conference to hold the MX, how the Meeting was organized, which States Parties and observers attended, and a brief outline of the work of the Meeting. Appended to this report is 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 might be relevant in their own circumstances. It took roughly 40 minutes to complete the formal proceedings of the day.

Universalization

Just before the adoption of the report from the MX, the Chairman gave a verbal report on progress towards universalization of the Convention. The Chairman regretted he was unable to report that any state had joined the BWC since the 2008 Meeting of States Parties (MSP). The accession of the Cook Islands announced on the last day of the MSP had brought the total of States Parties to 163. [*Note*: at the time of the 2006 Review Conference decision on 'Promotion of Universalization' the BWC had 155 States Parties.] However, Amb. Grinius noted that there had been considerable efforts, particularly in relation to African and Pacific states and that it 'seems reasonable to expect these efforts will result in further accessions'. The Chairman also noted the BWPP universalization report launched the evening before [available via <http://www.bwpp.org/publications.html>]. The Chairman's formal report on universalization will be given at the MSP in December.

Closing statements and remarks

Following adoption of the report, Iran made its usual statement noting that consensus on the report should not imply that Iran recognised the state of Israel (mentioned as an observer). Six further States Parties gave brief closing statements – Sweden (for the European Union), Ukraine, Cuba (for the Non-Aligned), China, Australia (for the Western group), and Slovakia (for the Eastern group). Each of these followed the traditional format of expressing the thanks for the efforts of the Chairman and of the other States Parties. Cuba took the opportunity to emphasise the earlier non-aligned call for a formal mechanism for Article X implementation. The Chairman gave his own closing remarks, describing the Meeting as 'focused, positive and constructive' and noting 'impressively broad' participation by 95 States Parties. An estimated 190 experts (out of a total of around 500 delegates) had flown

in. He also commented that there had been an increase in 'comfort level' for delegates dealing with BWC Meetings and noted in particular that some countries had been forthright about specific needs and requirements to improve their systems of disease surveillance.

Side events

There was one side event on Friday, a breakfast seminar on the subject of smallpox held by the International Security & Biopolicy Institute (ISBI) <http://biopolicy.org>. Presentations were given by Robert Drillen, Director of Research, INSERM, Strasbourg on 'Could chemical synthesis and genetic engineering of the smallpox virus enable recreation?' and Prof. Barry Kellman, (ISBI President), on 'Chemical synthesis of smallpox'.

Reflections

A conscious effort is taken in writing these daily summaries to report what has taken place 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.

As the Chairman noted, the comfort level of delegates has certainly increased, leading to more relaxed working sessions and honest discussion. One of the oddities of diplomacy is that everything is normally phrased in particular terms – there aren't 'problems' but 'challenges', for example. This MX used much more practical language as befits the topic under discussion.

This was the second MX to have been completely open, following the precedent of 2008, with none of the sessions held behind closed doors. This openness is appropriate for the exchange of ideas that are needed to deal with new problems (or problems not previously identified) which require new solutions and new approaches.

While there have been no additional ratifications or accessions to the BWC so far in 2009, signs remain positive. For example, just in front of where the NGOs sat in the back of the conference room was the allocated seat for Tanzania which had sent two senior figures from their capital. That a country in the process of preparing its ratification should assign personnel in this fashion shows a commitment to the Convention

A concern raised over many years has been that the threat from deliberate disease should be discussed in careful terms, lest the impression is given to potential abusers of biological materials that the possibilities are easier than had been imagined. It is notable that the discussion amongst experts has been framed much more carefully in recent years, although, on occasion, some quantitative data is used outside of its original context. The presentation by Emergent BioSolutions Inc. (an anthrax vaccine manufacturer) at a side event stated that the casualty effects of a one megaton nuclear weapon can be reproduced with only 6.5 kg of anthrax, without citing a specific source. However, this figure derives from a 1995 paper that regarded this number as an *minimum* requirement in near perfect conditions with high levels of technical expertise to achieve 100% aerosolization in use against a totally unprotected population, noting that urban populations would gain some protection from the buildings they were in, thus requiring more material to be used. Indeed, the paper – Karl Lowe, Graham Pearson and Victor Utgoff, 'Potential Values of a Simple BW Protective Mask', Institute for Defense Analyses Paper P-3077, September 1995 – illustrated that with basic protective measures the quantity of anthrax required to have the same casualty effects as a one megaton nuclear weapon would be raised to some 65,000 kg. The irony of the use of the minimum estimate from the 1995 paper is that these basic protective measures do not include vaccination.

This is the sixth and final report from the Meeting of Experts for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which was held from 24 to 28 August 2009 in Geneva. The reports are designed to help people who were not in Geneva to follow the proceedings.

The reports have been prepared by Richard Guthrie (<richard@cbw-events.org.uk>) on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) in co-operation with the Verification Research, Training and Information Centre (VERTIC). Copies of reports from this meeting and of earlier meetings are available via <http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>.