

Thursday 26th August 2010

The Third Day: International cooperation

The 2010 Meeting of Experts (MX) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC/BWC) continued on Wednesday morning, with Ambassador Pedro Oyarce of Chile in the Chair. Again, there was an early start with a pre-meeting side event.

The Working Sessions

In the draft programme of work, the morning working session was to be on the subject of 'Provision of assistance and coordination with relevant organizations: health aspects' with the afternoon working session on 'Provision of assistance and coordination with relevant organizations: security aspects'. Where copies of contributions have been provided by those who delivered them, the ISU will place these on its website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>.

Presentations were given in Working Session 3 by the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), Sweden, the UK, Republic of Korea, Georgia and the USA, China, Germany and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and, after lunch, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Presentations were given in Working Session 4 by Germany, the UK, Nigeria, Switzerland and the USA, Interpol and the Netherlands, Canada and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Before the meeting adjourned, Ambassador Oyarce indicated there were three more presentations to be made in Working Session 4 which would be given on Thursday morning.

In international meetings there is a certain element of subjects being raised away from the session allocated for them. Sometimes this is simply pragmatic, a country might devote the substantial proportion of a presentation to the agenda subject but say a few words on a separate subject of the meeting rather than take the floor again later. In other cases this can be unavoidable, if an expert is only in Geneva at a particular time that material has to be presented then. The third day of this MX saw a greater drift between allocated subjects than normal. This has implications for the form of thematic analysis presented here. Rather than select presentations under the 'health aspects' and 'security aspects' themes, other themes have been chosen. Points raised during Wednesday's sessions that will fit in more readily with the analysis in later daily reports will be dealt with in the coming days.

International organizations relating to health

The WHO, OIE and FAO each described their activities in relation to assistance and coordination activities. Each has systems to identify unusual events. There is an arrangement between them – the Global Early Warning System (GLEWS) – which brings together officials and information from the three organizations on a daily basis to identify major animal diseases, some of which may affect humans. Each of the three bodies is able to provide expertise and other assistance to states through regional offices. The FAO gave details of its Emergency Centre for Transboundary Animal Diseases (ECTAD). The WHO spoke of its recent arrangement with the UNODA regarding the UNSG mechanism (see below).

The UNSG mechanism

The UNODA described developments in relation to the mechanism by which the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) can investigate alleged use of biological weapons [see the first daily report for this MX for some background to this mechanism]. At January 2010 the roster included offers from 41 countries of 237 nominated experts and 42 laboratories. The process of updating the 1989 guidelines for investigations has focused on technical appendices relating to biological agents. Sweden described a training event held in Umea in 2009. Fourteen experts from the roster were involved in a range of activities including learning how the mechanism developed, practical issues of personal protection, investigation techniques and team-building. The UK introduced information from a working paper (WP.6) which described a seminar in London for experts nominated by the British government and the circulation of information within relevant government departments.

During the question and answer session that followed the UNODA presentation, South Africa indicated it was willing to nominate experts but wished to see the appendices to the guidelines before doing so. Questions from other States Parties included issues of laboratory accreditation and the geographical balance of roster experts in the training event. The answers were that the UNSG could not accredit laboratories himself and that a fair geographical balance had been achieved at for the training event.

Tabletop exercises

A number of tabletop exercises were described. Georgia and the USA outlined a workshop and exercise held in Tbilisi in May 2010 that is described in a joint working paper (WP.2). Black ICE II, was held by Switzerland and the USA in Montreaux in September 2009. Interpol and the Netherlands described an exercise held in Argentina in June 2010 and a joint exercise in the Netherlands planned for November 2010.

Post-exercise recommendations included: the need for better pre-incident planning, training and identification of potential resources that could be called upon; the need for agencies with different responsibilities to communicate more effectively (and also for those with similar responsibilities in neighbouring jurisdictions); and quicker disease identification.

Side events

There were two side events on Wednesday. Both were held in association with the Geneva Forum. The first, in the morning before the start of the day's formal events, was the launch of a report, 'Preparing for a Comprehensive Review of the CBM Mechanism at the Seventh BWC Review Conference', derived from three workshops sponsored by Germany, Norway and Switzerland. Presentations were given by Riccarda Torriani (Switzerland), Jon Erik Stromo (Norway), Filippa Lentzos (LSE) and Volker Beck (Germany). The event was chaired by Silvia Cattaneo (Geneva Forum). The report can be downloaded from <<http://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/home/topics/peasec/sec.html>>.

The second side event, held at lunchtime, was entitled 'Synthetic Biology: Engineering a Safer Future'. This was convened in association with the BWC ISU with sponsorship from the Government of Canada. The event was introduced by Silvia Cattaneo (Geneva Forum) and presentations were given by Jane Calvert (Edinburgh), Markus Schmidt (Organisation for International Dialogue and Conflict Management) and Eleonore Pawels (Woodrow Wilson International Center). The event was chaired by Piers Millett (ISU).

This is the fourth report from the Meeting of Experts for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 23 to 27 August 2010 in Geneva. The reports are designed to help people who are not in Geneva to follow the proceedings. Copies are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>>.

The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). Financial assistance for this project has been provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Sweden.

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