

Wednesday 31st July 2019

Conclusion of MX1 and a look forward to MX2 - science and technology

Tuesday saw the conclusion of the first of the 2019 series of Meetings of Experts (MXs) with a continuation of discussion of promotion of capacity building before moving on to the sub-topic of collaboration with international organizations and networks and adopting a factual report. There were also planning consultations for the next Review Conference.

Plenary room proceedings

The proceedings in the plenary meeting room started with a technical presentation from David Harper [as a Guest of the Meeting] who discussed the Chatham House Sustainable Laboratories Initiative <<<https://www.chathamhouse.org/about/structure/global-health-security/sustainable-laboratories-initiative>>>. In a first for the Convention, this presentation was given as a video conference. After a short question-and-answer session, the Meeting moved back to statements from delegations. Venezuela/NAM suggested that there was much remaining to be done in implementing Article X and emphasised elements of long-standing NAM proposals such as an action plan and an Article X implementation mechanism. A number of delegations gave statements on activities being undertaken such as training courses and regional workshops. The European Union and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) also gave statements.

After a short break for delegates to consider the draft, the Meeting adopted a factual report of its proceedings. Following past practice, the report will have a summary of discussion appended to it produced by the Chair under his own authority and thus which has no official status. The status of this annex is less important than its purpose – to provide a record of issues under discussion without drawing conclusions in a similar way to the synthesis papers that had been produced after the MXs in earlier work programmes

Reflections on MX1

Article X and the broader issues of cooperation and assistance bring together a cluster of topics for which there are long-standing divergence of views between delegations. An MX was never going to be a forum in which there was likely to be any significant political change. Perceptions of Article X remain closely related to how the BWC is seen overall. For those who see the BWC first and foremost as a disarmament and security treaty, the role of Article X is primarily to ensure that the prohibitions to prevent the use of disease as a weapon do not unduly hinder peaceful activities. For those who see the BWC as having a broader remit perceive all the articles as carrying equal significance and therefore deserving of equal implementation effort. There are many who hold positions somewhere in between these two, with many perceiving the global benefits of activities such as capacity building and efforts to control infectious disease as worth pursuing in their own right, irrespective of BWC provisions. Where on this spectrum any particular delegate may sit depends on a number of political, geographic and economic influences.

Are there ways to understand success or otherwise for MX1? There were fewer working papers submitted this year for MX1 [5, compared with 12 in 2018]. On the other hand, there was improved interactive discussion over the year before, which itself had been a great improvement on previous practice in this regard. From the perspective of

this author, the key test for all of the MXs is not so much what goes on in the room itself, but what are the wider, real world impacts that result from interactions at the Meetings. Concrete practical steps are being examined and elaborated. A simple example of one of these would be the BMJ Clinical Decision Support Training Initiative on which there was a technical presentation on Monday. This a tool built by doctors for doctors that can aid in those most difficult diagnoses – diseases which most health practitioners do not see on a regular basis but which can have significant consequences that go much wider than the individual patient. Awareness of the availability of such tools through interactions at the MX has a beneficial real-world impact. In terms of collective steps, the proposal in MX1 that might have the greatest impact on future BWC activities is the suggestion by India for a trust fund, from voluntary contributions, to support cooperation and assistance activities.

Preparations for MX2

The overarching topic for MX2 is ‘Review of Developments in the Field of Science and Technology Related to the Convention’. The Meeting will be discussing a number of agreed sub-topics, listed in the official agenda. The ongoing rapid advances within the life sciences mean that the BWC operates within a rapidly changing scientific and technological (S&T) context. These advances bring new positive opportunities for peaceful uses, such as novel medical treatments, but also lead to new negative opportunities to interfere with the processes that support life. The wide variety of these potential hostile uses lead to changes in the nature of risks and threats the overall regime to control biological weapons will need to counter. The BWC is at the core of this regime. Better understanding of the changing context is seen as critical to ensure efforts to control biological weapons remain relevant and effective at both the international and national level. Activities taking place under the auspices of the Convention cannot operate effectively unless this constantly changing context is well understood and there are tools available to assess risks and benefits in an effective and timely manner. In recent years, much discussion has focused around methods by which reviews of S&T developments might be carried out in order to allow the BWC and its states parties to effectively respond to this constantly changing context.

The background information document [BWC/MSP/2018/MX.2/2] produced by the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) for the MX2 held in 2018 contains much information relevant to the discussions this year.

Review Conference preparations

Before the start of the formal proceedings on Tuesday, the Chair of the 2019 Meeting of States Parties (MSP), Ambassador Yann Hwang (France), held informal consultations with delegates from states parties to discuss some key issues in preparation for the Ninth BWC Review Conference to be held in 2021. Owing to the plans for further refurbishment of the Palais des Nations, there will be reduced space for conferences while construction work is being undertaken. Therefore, decisions by states parties at the December MSP on timing and duration of the Review Conference and its associated preparatory meetings would be useful for planning purposes. Past practice has been to take such decisions at the MSP before the Review Conference, but the prevailing circumstances may mean that all conference facilities will have already been reserved for other purposes by the time of the 2020 MSP.

Side Event

There was one side event on Tuesday, convened by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chinese Academy of Sciences, on the topic of ‘Capacity Building of Biosafety Laboratories’.

This is the third report from the series of five Meetings of Experts for the BWC which are being held from 29 July to 8 August 2019 in Geneva. These reports have been produced for all BWC meetings since the Sixth Review Conference in 2006 by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). They are posted to <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>> and <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>>. An email subscription link is available on each page. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie, CBW Events <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.