BioWeapons Prevention Project

MX report 4

Friday 2nd August 2019

MX2 – future developments, science advice and codes of conduct

The second of the Meetings of Experts (MXs) opened on Wednesday with Yury Nikolaichik (Belarus) in the Chair. The overall topic for MX2 is 'Review of Developments in the Field of Science and Technology Related to the Convention'. The Chair took items in a different sequence to the order they appeared on the agenda, this was not without controversy. The meeting thus started its substantive work with agenda item 7 'Any other science and technology developments of relevance to the Convention and also to the activities of relevant multilateral organizations such as the WHO, OIE, FAO, IPPC and OPCW' before moving on to agenda item 6 'Development of a voluntary model code of conduct for biological scientists and all relevant personnel, and biosecurity education, by drawing on the work already done on this issue in the context of the Convention, adaptable to national requirements'. The meeting briefly moved on to the next sub-topic of risk assessment; coverage of this will be in the next report. At the end of the formal proceedings, a short collective statement was given by some non-governmental organizations on MX2-related issues. After the plenary had finished, a poster session was held outside of Room XX that went into the evening.

It was announced that the second week of this series of MXs will remain in Room XX; the initial plan would have seen the series move to the Assembly Hall.

Thursday was a public holiday in Switzerland, meaning the Palais des Nations was closed, and so further proceedings of MX2 were held over until Friday.

Agenda item 7

Following the usual formalities of starting a new meeting, such as adoption of the agenda, etc., the morning started with three technical presentations from Eleonore Pauwels of the Wilson Center [as a Guest of the Meeting], from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and from the World Health Organization (WHO). The presentations were on the interface between biosciences and cybertechnologies; on science advice within the OPCW, including the Scientific Advisory Board (SAB); and on foresight in relation to dual-use research, respectively. Each was followed by very detailed interactive question and answer sessions, meaning that these presentations took most of the morning. The following is therefore a distillation of key points made in the room by the presenters or by other participants.

There was considerable emphasis on the point that 'convergence' can mean much more than just overlap – some convergences between the biological and cyber spheres are game changers that will impact upon the world both positively and negatively. Many are likely to be complex hybrid systems that will be difficult to put into traditional categories. In biology, positive utilities of advances in the life sciences, are often the best defence against negative utilities of such advances, e.g., new vaccines against modified disease agents. In a similar way, the best defence against using machine learning on cyber systems can sometimes be effective defences also using machine learning. Understanding the significance of new developments is key to science advice, which needs to be part of a broader process that uses science to support decision making. Science advice has to be an on-going process, with on-going dialogue between policy making bodies and scientific

advisors. Science advisors need to be engaged with the wider scientific community so that they can understand where expertise lies. All SAB reports are now on the OPCW website and so it is possible to see how science advice has evolved in the chemical context.

Codes of Conduct (agenda item 6)

Iran spoke to the elements of its paper [WP.5] that fell within this agenda item. Technical presentations were then given by France on its Conseil national consultatif pour la biosécurité (CNCB) [National Advisory Council for Biosecurity] and by the OPCW on the Hague Ethical Guidelines – both of which, by coincidence, date back to 2015. These were followed by a mix of questions and comments on the presentations and by statements. There were many references back to the China-Pakistan paper [WP.9 of MX2 2018] which was a starting point for many interventions. There was an emphasis from many delegations that codes should be adopted voluntarily and not forced upon states parties – such that these are practices that do not add to legal obligations for states parties under the BWC. It was also noted that some governments in favour of codes would prefer professional and learned societies to draft any codes. The contexts for codes of conduct were highlighted, in that they shouldn't hinder peaceful activities and they have to be part of a broader process of education and awareness in which there are ongoing interactions. While disciplinary context is important, it was noted that codes need to work across different disciplines, and also to be flexible enough to apply to the varied work within disciplines. It was identified that there was no code that could cover all contexts. Most discussion in the room was about the need for codes in national contexts [perhaps because national was in the full sub-topic description] with far less said about matching codes for researchers doing the same work in different countries – indeed who would decide on such a code? A key aspect of the Hague Ethical Guidelines is that they are not a code in themselves, but a set of guidelines that help enable the development of appropriate codes. If codes in the life sciences are being developed on a national basis, they could benefit from further discussion of global benchmarks as to what constitutes good research behaviour.

The agenda *vs* the programme of work

The terms 'agenda' and 'programme of work' are often used interchangeably, but in international diplomacy they have specific and distinct meanings. Formally, an agenda is simply a list of subjects to be discussed. A programme of work is sometimes put together to illustrate timings simply by estimating how long each item might take and so for a meeting held over more than one day busy delegates or experts can be guided by this. A programme of work might take items in a different order to the agenda owing to the travel commitments of some participants that might contribute to particular items. Sometimes the sequence may be changed for intellectual reasons. At the start of MX2, the Chair explained the re-ordering 'so that delegations could receive the freshest information about events in other platforms and about the potential trends that could be discussed in the BWC'. For example, discussion of the broader aspects of developments in the life sciences had a useful impact on discussion of codes.

Side Events

There were four side events held on Wednesday. Breakfast events were convened by Russia entitled 'Scientific Advisory Committee' and by Switzerland on 'Spiez Convergence, Report of the third workshop'. Two at lunchtime were convened by India on 'Emerging Landscapes of Science and Technology: New Frontiers and Challenges in Bio-threat Detection and Mitigation' and by the University of Hamburg Centre for Science and Peace Research, the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security and the University of Sussex on 'Strategies for the Risk Assessment of Genome Editing'.

This is the fourth 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>.