BioWeapons Prevention Project

MX report 3

Wednesday 14th August 2013

The second day: cooperation and assistance

The 2013 Meeting of Experts (MX) of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) continued on Tuesday with both working sessions dedicated to the subject of 'Cooperation and assistance, with a particular focus on strengthening cooperation and assistance under Article X'. The Non-Aligned Movement group of States Parties submitted a Working Paper on measures for full, effective and non-discriminatory implementation of Article X. As with the working session on Monday, there was much more detailed discussion and interaction than in previous years.

It is likely that some of the presentation materials from Tuesday will be placed on the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) website <http://www.unog.ch/bwc>.

Second and third working sessions – cooperation and assistance

There was an opportunity for some general comments on the overall topic before the discussion was divided into sub-topics and Iran (for the non-aligned), Brazil, France, Cuba, USA, European Union, India and Australia did so. The Iran/NAM statement contained a number of detailed comments on issues such as capacity building and noted that although there was no agreed definition of biosafety and biosecurity in the BWC, there were great benefits from international cooperation in these areas as well as in detecting and responding to outbreaks of infectious diseases whether naturally occurring or deliberate. Brazil suggested that measures which restricted access to materials that had a public health relevance would be a breach of Article X. The USA noted that it had some US$41 billion of biotechnology/life sciences-related exports in 2012 but that only US$17 million, less than a thousandth of the total, needed a licence and only 2 licence applications had been denied. The EU highlighted its Centres of Excellence initiative to mitigate CBRN risks in partner countries through activities such as knowledge development and transfer of best practices with a budget close to EUR100 million by the end of the year. India noted that its own situation of significant developments in the biological sector in recent years had led it to share its experiences and encourage South-South cooperation; examples of practical cooperation included supply of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and H7N9 influenza diagnostic kits.

The first sub-topic was 'Reports by States Parties on their implementation of Article X, and reports by the ISU on the operation of the database system to facilitate assistance requests and offers' with contributions from ISU, Georgia, Germany, Russia, Mongolia, UK, South Africa, Malaysia, India and Iran. The ISU reported on the operation of the Article X database that was established following a decision at the Seventh Review Conference. The database currently contains 23 offers of various types of assistance from 5 States Parties, but only 2 requests from 2 States Parties, one of which has now been partially fulfilled. The low level of requests indicate that the system was not functioning as intended. The database is located in a part of the ISU website accessible only to officials from States Parties. There were suggestions that the database could be moved to a public area, although it was recognised that requesting countries may not wish to see their details made public.

Georgia spoke about its Richard G. Lugar Center for Public Health Research, which was built with support from the USA. Germany spoke about its Programme for Excellence in Biological and Health Security and encouraged countries that might be able to benefit from this programme to contact the German delegation during the MX.

The second sub-topic was 'Challenges and obstacles to developing international cooperation, assistance and exchange in the biological sciences and technology, including equipment and material, for peaceful purposes to their full potential, and possible means of overcoming these' with contributions from ISU, World Health Organization (WHO), USA, India and Canada. The ISU introduced its background paper (INF.2). The WHO presented on a report prepared with the World Trade Organization and the World Intellectual Property Organization on 'Promoting access to Medical Technologies and Innovation'.

The third sub-topic was 'A range of specific measures for the full and comprehensive implementation of Article X taking into account all of its provisions, including facilitation of cooperation and assistance, including in terms of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information for peaceful purposes, and identification of critical gaps and needs in these areas' with contributions from WHO, China, USA, Iraq and UK. The focus of most discussion under the sub-topic was MERS and H7N9 influenza – both of which are diseases that have emerged since the Seventh BWC Review Conference. Experiences were shared relating to both the human and animal implications of these diseases.

Sub-topic four was 'Ways and means to target and mobilize resources, including financial resources, to address gaps and needs for assistance and cooperation, in particular from developed to developing States Parties', but no delegations chose to speak on this.

The fifth sub-topic was 'Education, training, exchange and twinning programmes and other means of developing human resources in the biological sciences and technology relevant to the implementation of the Convention, particularly in developing countries'. A presentation was given on a laboratory twinning between the UK and Turkey. Germany outlined training opportunities it was providing in relation to the UN Secretary-General's investigative mechanism for investigating alleged use.

The sixth sub-topic was 'Capacity-building, through international cooperation, in biosafety and biosecurity, and for detecting, reporting, and responding to outbreaks of infectious disease or biological weapons attacks, including in the areas of preparedness, response, and crisis management and mitigation', with contributions from Mongolia, WHO, Lithuania, USA and World Organization for Animal Health/OIE. The WHO spoke about its 5-year plan to promote biosafety. The OIE spoke about the elimination of the animal disease Rinderpest, only the second disease to have been eliminated by human action.

Side events

There were two side events on Tuesday. A breakfast event was convened by the University of Bradford, the 1540 Committee Group of Experts, the US National Academies and the Landau Network-Centro Volta on 'Recent Advances in Biosecurity Education'. Presentations were given by Tatyana Novossiolova (Bradford), Gerald Walther (Bradford), Jo Husbands (National Academy of Science) and Dana Perkins (1540). The event was chaired by Ambassador Urs Schmid (Switzerland). A lunchtime event was convened by the Geneva Forum entitled 'Science and Technology Mini-University' which entailed a public briefing on some of the science relevant to MX for non-scientists. Presentations were given by Meg L Flanagan (US Department of State) and David R Benson (University of Connecticut). The event was chaired by Kerstin Vignard (Geneva Forum).

This is the third report from the Meeting of Experts for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 12 to 16 August 2013 in Geneva. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) and are available via the BWPP website at <http://www.bwpp.org> or via <http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>.

The author can be contacted during the Meeting of Experts on +41 76 507 1026 or <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.