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The 2008 Meeting of States Parties: Setting the Scene

The 2008 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) is the second meeting of the second year of the second inter-sessional process for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC/BWC). The MSP was preceded by a one-week Meeting of Experts (MX) in August. The BWPP daily reports from the 2006 Review Conference and the subsequent Meetings are available via the BWPP website <<http://www.bwpp.org>>.

The topics for discussion at this year's meetings are 'National, regional and international measures to improve biosafety and biosecurity, including laboratory safety and security of pathogens and toxins' and 'Oversight, education, awareness raising, and adoption and/or development of codes of conduct with the aim of preventing misuse in the context of advances in bio-science and bio-technology research with the potential of use for purposes prohibited by the Convention'. The topics were agreed at the Sixth Review Conference for the BWC which was held at the end of 2006. Ambassador Georgi Avramchev (The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) is the Chairman for the 2008 meetings.

It is notable that the MSP is opening on World AIDS Day – an example, as if one were needed, of the human cost of infectious disease. The possibilities of the hostile uses of disease, together with the hazards posed by natural outbreaks of disease, are a problem that has to be tackled by all states of the world. But tackling such a common problem in a more effective manner is not simply a question of international cooperation. There is a continuing need for improved implementation activities within countries.

The 2008 Meeting of Experts

The MX met at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland from 18 to 22 August 2008. The Meeting produced a number of ideas and suggestions which were annexed to its formal report (document BWC/MSP/2008/MX/3, dated 8 September 2008). These ideas and suggestions were condensed into a 'Synthesis Paper' prepared by the Chairman and circulated to States Parties (BWC/MSP/2008/L.1, dated 31 October 2008). These documents are available via the official BWC website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>> as well as via the BWPP website.

The inter-sessional process has been affected in the past by a certain lack of details and of concrete ideas or experiences being communicated at meetings – statements were often simplified or expressed in a very general nature. The 2008 MX benefited considerably from an additional level of detail in statements which is reflected in the above-mentioned documents.

Some 180 of the roughly 500 participants in the Meeting of Experts could be described as technical experts. It may seem a low figure at first glance having only one third of the participants being experts, but there are two notable factors to be considered.

The first is that experts are necessarily accompanied by regular diplomats on their delegations and so the experts will only ever constitute a proportion of those in the meeting. The second is that within many smaller states the pool of expertise available is limited to only a few people and the financial and opportunity costs of getting such a person to Geneva for a week may be prohibitive. In these cases it will be more productive for a country to use local representation than to have nobody in the meeting at all. However, if these meetings are to remain the primary forum for technical expertise on issues related to the potential for malign use of the life sciences, efforts must continue to bring the right people to the table – even if this requires external sponsorship – in order to assist them to be able to interact in ways that are both constructive and informative.

Issues of biosafety and biosecurity

Safety and security of dangerous pathogens in all laboratories are important contributors to public protection. Similar issues were raised in the 2003 Meetings of Experts/States Parties when the topics for discussion included ‘national mechanisms to establish and maintain the security and oversight of pathogenic microorganisms and toxins’.

There has been some difficulty with coming to clear and precise definitions of ‘biosafety’ and ‘biosecurity’, not least because in a number of languages these translate into the same term. One distinction between the two that has been generally accepted is that biosafety broadly deals with preventing the unintended release of dangerous materials from laboratories and laboratory equipment while biosecurity broadly deals with preventing the deliberate removal of dangerous materials from laboratories by persons who may use them for hostile purposes. Biosecurity has also had other meanings in other contexts.

Issues of education and codes of conduct

Education and awareness raising for scientists involved in the life sciences are seen as important to help them understand the potential for hostile uses of their knowledge and research. These efforts include codes of conduct for the activities of the scientists themselves. Similar issues were raised in the 2005 Meetings of Experts/States Parties when the topics for discussion were ‘the content, promulgation, and adoption of codes of conduct for scientists’.

Progress on Universalization

The 2006 Review Conference took a decision on ‘Promotion of Universalization’ to encourage countries outside of the BWC to join the Convention. At the time of that decision, the BWC had 155 States Parties. Since the 2007 Meeting of States Parties, Zambia (15 January) and Madagascar (7 March) have acceded to the Convention and the United Arab Emirates (19 June) has ratified it, bringing the total of States Parties to 162. There are indications that other countries are making significant progress in ratification/ accession processes, at least one of which, Cook Islands, is expected to accede soon.

A formal report on progress towards universalization is due to be made by the Chairman during the MSP.

This is the first report from the Meeting of States Parties for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 1 to 5 December 2008 in Geneva. The reports are designed to help people who are not in Geneva to follow the proceedings.

The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) in co-operation with the Verification Research, Training and Information Centre (VERTIC). Copies are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/2008MSP/MSP2008Resources.html>>.

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