

Monday 16th July 2012

The 2012 Meeting of Experts: setting the scene

The opening of the 2012 Meeting of Experts (MX) marks the first of four years of meetings in the third inter-sessional process for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC). The MX will be followed by a one-week Meeting of States Parties (MSP) in December. The third inter-sessional process was agreed at the Seventh BWC Review Conference that was held in December 2011. The Conference decided that this set of annual meetings would discuss three on-going topics as well as specific topics in particular years.

The 2012 meetings will be chaired by Ambassador Boujemâa Delmi of Algeria. In an addition to earlier practice there will also be two Vice-Chairs – Ambassador Alexandre Fasel of Switzerland and Dr Cezary Lusinski of Poland. The 2011 Review Conference had nominated Ambassador Delmi's predecessor, Ambassador Idriss Jazaïry, to be the Chair but a rotation of personnel in the Algerian representation in Geneva led to the change.

A feature of the meetings in the inter-sessional processes is that they are much less formal than many other inter-governmental meetings, including BWC Review Conferences, which often end up much more focused on legalistic issues. By way of contrast, the inter-sessional process meetings are much more practical and focused on promoting ideas and learning from experiences in order to develop common understandings.

Topics under discussion during the 2012 meetings

The three on-going topics, also known as the standing agenda items, of the third inter-sessional process are 'Cooperation and assistance, with a particular focus on strengthening cooperation and assistance under Article X', 'Review of developments in the field of science and technology related to the Convention', and 'Strengthening national implementation'. In 2012 (and 2013) the meetings will also discuss 'How to enable fuller participation in the CBMs'. In a letter dated 21 June, the Chair proposed a breakdown of sub-topics under each of the topics that might be focused on in each year.

Article X covers the issue of access to the life sciences for peaceful purposes of the Convention and is seen as part of a bargain in which the renunciation of biological weapons and the control of the hostile uses of the life sciences have to be implemented in such a way as not to hinder the use of the life sciences for peaceful purposes. There remains a divergence of opinion between States Parties relating to Article X. Cooperation and assistance goes further than Article X and includes other aspects such as capacity building.

The changing science and technology context, and in particular the rapid advances in the life sciences, leads to changes in the nature of risks and threats the regime may need to counter, as well as providing new opportunities for peaceful uses.

Improved national implementation of the provisions of the BWC in ways that are appropriate to national contexts has long been seen as an important way of enhancing effectiveness of the overall regime to control biological weapons.

The system of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) under the Convention provides for returns to be provided by States Parties on certain relevant activities and facilities. While numbers of returns have been rising, there has been wide recognition that participation in CBMs could be improved further.

Preparations for the MX

Three background papers by the BWC's Implementation Support Unit (ISU) and two Working Papers by the United Kingdom had been issued as formal MX documents before the opening of the meeting. A further background paper and two documents submitted by the United States relating to Article X activities had been issued as 'advance versions' prior to being typeset as official documents. The advance release of papers allows for their contents to be considered before start of the MX. All these papers can be found via the BWC ISU website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>; official documents can also be found via the UN documents server <<http://documents.un.org>> (reference numbers for the official documents for this meeting all start BWC/MSP/2012/MX/). Additional papers are likely to be issued.

Meetings of Experts – a developing format

The annual BWC meetings have developed in format and style since the first inter-sessional process started in 2003. Unlike earlier Meetings of Experts, this MX will not include much time for a general exchange of views, although there will be one session for introductory statements that cover more than one of the agenda items. There will also be a poster session following the end of conference room proceedings on Tuesday. As with earlier meetings, there will be a number of side events. While the side events have traditionally been held by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), there has been a trend for other bodies, for example governments and inter-governmental organizations, to make use of these opportunities as well. A feature being repeated from earlier inter-sessional meetings is the use of 'Guests of the Meeting' – experts invited to share their expertise.

As the MXs in this third inter-sessional process will cover more topics than the equivalent earlier meetings had done, it is possible that the way these multiple topics are handled will further develop in the coming years.

There may be a further external influence on this MX as there is considerable attention on the negotiating conference for an Arms Trade Treaty being convened during most of July in New York. Key disarmament specialists from many countries are based in Geneva and some have been assigned to those negotiations. This means that many individuals familiar with BWC processes will not be in Geneva during this MX.

About these reports

Starting from the Sixth Review Conference in 2006, the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) has produced daily reports from each of the BWC meetings. The reports were initially designed to help people who were not in Geneva to follow the proceedings but are now also widely circulated each morning amongst delegates. Six reports will be produced during this MX, starting with this setting the scene report. A report will be produced covering each day's activities, the last of which will be circulated electronically after the MX has concluded.

The BWPP daily reports from the 2006 and 2011 Review Conferences, as well as those from the annual meetings in between, are available via the BWPP website at <<http://www.bwpp.org>>.

This is the first report from the Meeting of Experts for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 16 to 20 July 2012 in Geneva.

The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) who can be contacted during the Meeting of Experts relating to these reports on +41 76 507 1026 or <richard@cbw-events.org>.