

Tuesday 17th July 2012

The 2012 Meeting of Experts: the opening day

The 2012 Meeting of Experts (MX) of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) opened on Monday morning with Ambassador Boujemâa Delmi of Algeria in the chair.

Opening activities and statements

In his opening remarks, Ambassador Delmi noted that the Seventh Review Conference, from which the MX gets its authority, had 'managed to arrive at a good compromise' in putting together the topics to be discussed. The Ambassador also noted that sponsorship had been provided by Australia and Germany via the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) to assist representatives from Colombia, Ghana and Namibia to attend the Meeting.

Formal decisions included admitting Israel and Namibia as observer states; the European Union, the Food and Agricultural Organization, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Interpol, the League of Arab States, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the World Health Organization and the World Organization for Animal Health/OIE as international bodies; and three UN agencies: UNODA, UNIDIR, and UNICRI as UN bodies.

While the MX did not include an allocation of time for general debate, some States Parties took the opportunity to use the opening session to make introductory remarks. These were given in the following order: Cuba (for the non-aligned), Argentina, Morocco, Indonesia, China, Malaysia, India, Mexico, Chile, Brazil, Iran, Guatemala, Pakistan, Turkey and Ghana. There was a considerable focus on assistance and cooperation issues as might be expected since most of these countries have previously made clear statements calling for emphasis on implementation of Article X.

Some themes appeared in a number of statements. The selection of topics for the annual meetings was referred to as being 'balanced'. There was a welcome for the Article X database agreed upon at the Seventh Review Conference and hopes expressed that it would assist provision of cooperation and assistance. There were calls for a mechanism beyond the database for Article X implementation and for verification arrangements for the Convention. The rapid developments in the life sciences were noted, and that these developments have both positive and negative aspects. Some countries provided examples of developments in national implementation, with Morocco highlighting that it had now put together a draft law on the handling of biological agents and Malaysia noting that a draft law it had prepared had been the subject of discussion in a meeting attended by a wide range of stakeholders. Guatemala noted it was active in the Central American Integration System efforts on Security Council resolution 1540 which included a significant national implementation element. On CBMs, there was a widespread recognition that more could be done and that they were not a substitute for verification. Pakistan noted it had provided a CBM return this year after much inter-agency work.

After these statements, six non-governmental organizations (NGOs) addressed the Meeting: the University of Bradford; International Network of Engineers and Scientists; Pax Christi International; the University of London; the Defence Medical College of Japan and the Bradford Disarmament Research Centre; and the Biosecurity Working Group of the Inter-Academy Panel on International Issues. These statements will be posted on the BWC ISU website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>.

Cooperation and assistance

The working session in the afternoon was on ‘Cooperation and assistance, with a particular focus on strengthening cooperation and assistance under Article X’. Statements were given in the following order: Cuba (for the non-aligned), Iran, Ukraine, European Union, UK, Cuba (in its national capacity), France, Australia, USA, Philippines, Russia, Switzerland, India, Chile, China, Mexico and Ghana. Iran and the USA took the floor again to follow up on points made in other statements.

Many countries spoke of their activities in support of international assistance, their experiences of receiving assistance or appeals for further assistance. A number of references were made to benefits that might result from cooperative activities with other bodies that have overlapping remits such as the WHO while at least one State Party, Iran, was concerned that mandates should remain distinct.

Iran stated that ‘discriminatory trade rules’ on materials and technologies relevant to the life sciences were a ‘violation’ of Article X. Ukraine highlighted a need for some form of scientific advisory body for the BWC. The EU noted that new Council Decisions were expected to follow up on the existing Joint Actions in support of the BWC and WHO. The UK denied its trade rules were discriminatory. The Philippines highlighted the new workplan on WMD issues agreed by the ASEAN Regional Forum earlier in July. India noted that it had both provided assistance to other countries and benefited from assistance given by others.

The working session ended with an introduction by Richard Lennane of the ISU on the Article X database. He noted that details of offers of assistance, starting with those provided by the United States, were now being entered into the database. He also noted that requests for assistance, which do not have to be tied to specific offers, were also invited to be placed in the database.

Documents of the Meeting

Four Working Papers by the USA were published as BWC/MSP/2012/MX/WP.3 through WP.6. The US Article X activities report became document INF.5. A Working Paper by China was made available in advance copy, as were two information papers from the EU.

Side events

Two side events were scheduled for Monday. The first, at lunchtime, was convened by the Inter-Academy Panel (the global network of sciences academies) on the subject of ‘Recent Developments in Science and Technology’. The event was opened, and chaired, by Andrzej Gorski (Polish Academy of Sciences). Presentations were given by Andrew Pitt (Aston University), Richard A Johnson (Global Helix LLC) and Ralf Trapp (consultant).

The second event was to be ‘speed networking’ after the formal proceedings had finished – an activity held during earlier MXs, but which did not take place as few delegates turned up to join in. In 2010, for example, participants were rotated around the room to meet a different person after each minute and a half – a method that proved highly successful at helping delegates get to know each other in an informal setting.

This is the second 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). Copies of the reports are available via the BWPP website at <<http://www.bwpp.org>>.

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