

Thursday 19th July 2012

The 2012 Meeting of Experts: the third day

The 2012 Meeting of Experts (MX) of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) moved into its third day on Wednesday, with its second session on the topic of science and technology developments and its first on strengthening national implementation.

In parallel with the MX, the Global Partnership (GP) Biosecurity Working Group – representatives of the GP donors together with relevant partners from international bodies dealing with global biological security issues – met in closed session to discuss current priorities and possible future activities.

Science and technology developments

The morning session was on 'Review of developments in the field of science and technology related to the Convention', following on from Tuesday morning, and was chaired by Ambassador Boujemâa Delmi of Algeria, the Chair of the MX. Prepared statements were given by: UK, Germany, Mexico, Japan, Australia (on convergence), Cuba (national capacity), China, Switzerland, India, USA, Brazil, Australia (on codes), Mexico, Spain, Iran and the Netherlands. The session concluded with the two 'guest of the meeting' presentations by Marcus Graf (International Gene Synthesis Consortium) on 'Synthetic Biology: Biosecurity in a Rapidly Emerging Field' and Judi Sture (Bradford University, UK) on 'Biosecurity Education from the University of Bradford: Open-access and Accredited Programmes Available to All'. Many of the issues raised repeated or reinforced points made during the Tuesday morning session. However, the suggested split of discussion sub-topics was more closely followed under this standing agenda item than that for the earlier cooperation and assistance discussions.

It was noted that risk management and mitigation arrangements have to be in proportion to the risks identified. Improvements in the understanding of risks that have to be accounted for when comparing them with benefits are needed. There is a need to be active rather than reactive in monitoring scientific and technological developments and a need to recognise risks and benefits of any particular dual-use research as early as possible.

Many points were made about codes of various sorts with a number of interventions suggesting that contents of codes should be a national prerogative, although some recognised a role for codes within international professional associations. Codes contribute to reducing potential misuse, but are only part of the solution. Codes do not substitute for legal measures and are most effective when they compliment them. India proposed 11 guiding principles for codes. Spain noted that a new codes manual was in preparation. Australia recollected its paper to the MX in 2005 (WP.35) on layers of codes.

There was recognition that codes had a particular overlap with education and awareness raising activities as any code has a useful impact in making researchers consider carefully the consequences of their activities. It was noted that education and awareness raising needed to be on the curricula of educational establishments and should not be treated

as a one-off lesson. The USA described how the Federal Bureau of Investigation has moved into active outreach with biological scientists.

Convergence issues, especially convergence between biology and chemistry were further discussed. There was emphasis that this was about convergence of the sciences and therefore, in consequence, a change in the nature of certain global challenges. This does not mean convergence of the existing Conventions, but awareness of the implications of convergence means that existing provisions could be used more wisely in new contexts.

National implementation

The afternoon session was on 'Strengthening national implementation' and was chaired by Vice-Chair Ambassador Alexandre Fasel of Switzerland. Prepared statements were given by: Cuba (for the non-aligned), the European Union (from the international organizations seat), Malaysia, Canada, Thailand, Iran, France, Belarus, Denmark, China, Australia, Switzerland, Cuba (national capacity), Russia, UK, USA, Chile India and Turkey. There followed a short discussion that included some of the statement contributors plus Mexico.

Many statements outlined existing implementation measures and some indicated forthcoming or planned improvements. A number of interventions referred to details of implementation outlined in Working Papers either already published or forthcoming. Sometimes this implementation is in the form of primary legislation, but often is supported by more detailed regulations. A number of calls were made for a legally binding international instrument to strengthen the Convention, not only for verification but to set global standards which national implementation could follow. It was noted that Article IV of the Convention obliges States Parties to undertake implementation activities.

Many interventions noted that national implementation is never complete, it needs regular review and improvement to face new challenges and incorporate lessons learned. Proposals have been put forward on voluntary methods to evaluate national implementation. One, by Canada and Switzerland, is that of compliance assessment. A second is a peer review mechanism proposed by France at the Seventh Review Conference. In addition, Switzerland noted it had commissioned VERTIC, an NGO, to review its national implementation legislation.

Paul Wilson (Australia), who had been the facilitator during the Seventh Review Conference on the updating of the Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) which had included the addition of declarations of legislation, regulation and other measures in relation to biosafety and biosecurity under Form E, urged States Parties to submit details of their national implementation measures in their CBM returns.

Side events

Two side events were held on Wednesday. The first, before the day's formal proceedings, was convened by the United States on 'Global Partnership bio-security activities and how they relate to the BTWC'. Presentations were given by Ambassador Laura Kennedy (USA), Ambassador Bonnie Jenkins (USA), Kristine Beardsley (USA), Piers Millett (ISU) and Ludy Suryantoro (World Health Organization).

The second, at lunchtime, was convened by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons on 'The Convergence of Chemistry and Biology: Perspectives of the OPCW Scientific Advisory Board Temporary Working Group'. Presentations were given by three Group members: Bob Mathews, Bill Kane and Piers Millett.

This is the fourth 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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