

Wednesday 24th November 2021

The end of the general debate and consideration of MX1 and MX2

The second day of the 2020 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) heard the final statements made in the general debate before considering the reports from the Meetings of Experts (MXs) held earlier this year. The Chair of the MSP is Ambassador Cleopa Mailu (Kenya) who presided of most of the proceedings during the day. Vice-Chair Robertas Rosinas (Lithuania) presided over the latter part of the afternoon session. The reporting here includes some points in relation to the MX topics that were made earlier in the general debate.

Outside of the formal proceedings of the MSP, informal interactions continued about who should be put forward as President of the Ninth Review Conference, scheduled to be held in 2022.

The general debate draws to a close

Statements were given by Colombia, South Africa and Angola as states parties. Egypt gave a statement as a signatory state (i.e., a state that had signed but not ratified the Convention). The European Union (EU), the Organization of American States (OAS), the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), the UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) and Interpol gave statements as international organizations. During the morning, the MSP moved into an informal mode to hear statements from non-governmental speakers. Following recent practice there was a joint statement from some NGOs read out by King's College London. This was followed by statements from the Verification Research, Training and Information Centre (VERTIC), Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, BioSecure, George Mason University, University College London, University of Hamburg and Georgetown University.

The general debate on Tuesday included further 'right of reply' exchanges. These reflected geopolitical tensions between particular states and, judging from comments overheard in the corridor over the lunch break, were perceived by some delegates in the room as a distraction from BWC issues.

MX1 -- cooperation and assistance

MX1 was on the topic of 'Cooperation and Assistance, with a Particular Focus on Strengthening Cooperation and Assistance under Article X' and was a two-day MX chaired by Kimmo Laukkanen (Finland) who introduced the report of the meeting including the annex he had prepared.

In the discussion that followed, a number of interventions picked up on the suggestion that the impacts of the pandemic had showed the weakness of implementation of Article X, a point which the Chair had noted in his Annex had been made during MX1. There was widespread recognition that the building of additional capacities in developing states would help with combatting biological threats whether natural or intentional. There were many references to working papers submitted to the MSP. These included reporting on Article X activities by Republic of Korea [WP.8], Russia [WP.9] and the USA

[WP.11], the latter focusing on laboratory support through the Biological Threat Reduction Program. France updated its earlier paper on the SecBio platform proposal [WP.5]. Cuba repeated its earlier paper on difficulties and obstacles [WP.10]. Many references were given to workshops or similar activities, many held virtually owing to pandemic restrictions. There was much discussion on what might be done operationally within the structures of the BWC to enhance Article X implementation. Aspects suggested in multiple interventions included improving the Article X database, creation of a cooperation committee, the addition of a cooperation officer in the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) and the creation of a voluntary trust fund to support cooperation and assistance activities. None of these are mutually exclusive and elements have broad support, although some aspects remain subject to strongly held divergent views. There were many expressions of support for activities to involve young scientists on the issues of disarmament and security, especially young scientists from the global south. Regional approaches were prominent. For example, a number of delegations referred to activities under the Signature Initiative to Mitigate Biological Threats in Africa supported by the Global Partnership. Given that the MX1 topic brought together a cluster of issues for which there have been long-standing divergences of perspectives between delegations, the discussions this year seem to indicate that there is more common ground than before. The experiences of the pandemic may well be significant contributors to this.

MX2 – science and technology

MX2 was on the topic of ‘Review of Developments in the Field of Science and Technology Related to the Convention’. It was chaired by Kazuhiro Nakai (Japan) who has since moved to another diplomatic post. His successor, Shigeru Umetsu, conveyed to the MSP comments from Mr Nakai introducing the report of the meeting including the Chair’s annex he had prepared.

During discussion, the item of possible action that drew most attention was that of an enhanced process for review of scientific and technological (S&T) developments. Until recently, much of the discussion has been in pursuit of specific models of how such a process might work, primarily based on a binary choice between a panel selected in some way in order to create a board (or committee) or an open-ended structure involving experts from all states parties willing to participate. Each option had advantages and disadvantages, the balances of which were perceived differently by different delegations. A sign that perspectives are converging is that there was a noticeable lack of comments in support of either of the binary options in this MSP. Instead, multiple references were made to possibilities of a hybrid model drawing on elements of the earlier models which would allow delegations coming at this issue from a variety of perspectives to each get advantages they desire. A second item of possible action was the development of the Tianjin Biosecurity Guidelines for Codes of Conduct for Scientists which were developed following a China-Pakistan proposal. These guidelines were endorsed by the InterAcademy Partnership (IAP), the global network of science academies, in July. China and Pakistan (with Brazil as co-sponsor) repeated its most recent MX paper on the guidelines [WP.7]. Many interventions welcomed the guidelines. Key aspects referred to included that they were flexible to be able to be adapted to local conditions and that development of the guidelines with academic bodies made them more acceptable to the research world. The proposal has been made that the guidelines should be endorsed by the Ninth Review Conference and no interventions disagreed with this proposal. There was relatively limited discussion on the role of standards that could be used in developing management systems in relation to possible biological risks, in particular the development of ISO 35001:2019.

This is the third report from the 2020 MSP of the Biological Weapons Convention being held from 22 to 25 November 2021 in Geneva. These reports have been produced for all BWC meetings since the Sixth Review Conference in 2006 by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) and are available from <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>> and <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>>. An email subscription link is available on each page. The reports are written by Richard Guthrie, CBW Events, who is solely responsible for their contents. He can be contacted via <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.