

Wednesday 8th August 2018

The opening of the 2018 Meetings of Experts: MX1 cooperation & assistance

Tuesday morning saw the first day of the first of the Meetings of Experts (MXs) for this year under the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC). MX1 is on the topic of 'Cooperation and Assistance, with a Particular Focus on Strengthening Cooperation and Assistance under Article X'. The meeting was opened with Ambassador Maria Teresa Almojuela (Philippines) in the Chair who was able to promptly steer the plenary through the opening formalities allowing more time for substantive work.

The UN Web TV livestreaming appears to have worked well, although it has had the disadvantage of showing the speaker, not the slides, when presentations are being given. However, as with past practice, any presenter can provide their slides or other presentation materials to the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) to have them posted on the meeting website. The livestreaming can be watched via <http://bit.ly/bwcmxs2018> and each meeting seems likely to have a separate archive link on the UN Web TV system.

This MX has had a more interactive nature than most of its predecessors and so these daily reports will only refer to the first time any delegation takes the floor under each agenda sub-topic. There was considerable overlap between the sub-topics.

During the day, the appointment of Pedro Luiz Dalcero (Brazil) as Chair of MX2 was announced. At the end of the day, a short time was allowed for the action points from the NGO joint position paper relating to MX1 to be communicated to the meeting.

An overarching theme of the day was that the challenges of the control of biological weapons are multidimensional as are the peaceful uses and benefits of the life sciences, not least that improved efforts against infectious disease have significant public health benefits that no country can implement in isolation.

Consideration of reports by states parties

The ISU summarized the elements of its background paper for this MX that related to reports from states parties, noting that the number of reports was low. Australia, USA, Iran, UK, Russia, Germany, Italy, Saudi Arabia, China, Mali, Philippines, Mexico and Brazil took the floor. The first two of these spoke to their Article X reports (WP.1 and WP.7 respectively). UK spoke to an earlier report (WP.7, MSP 2017) and Russia spoke to both an earlier report (WP.37, Eighth Review Conference) and to a newly submitted information document – the recommendation has been for individual states to produce Article X reports every other year. There were some common themes, such as acknowledgement that these reports could not be comprehensive as Article X-relevant activities were spread across governments and were usually outside of formal BWC structures. Many interventions made reference to the various types of assistance that have been given in a variety of contexts. With such variety, it was suggested that a single format for reporting of activities might be difficult, while on the other hand a more consistent style of reporting could make it easier to draw information from the separate reports. It was noted that reports from those receiving assistance might provide valuable lessons for future assistance activities and the interventions from Mali and the Philippines were seen as helpful in this light.

Review of the Article X database report

The ISU introduced its report on the assistance and cooperation database noting that its earliest iteration was less like a database and more like simple lists of offers and requests. This initial iteration was mandated by the Seventh Review Conference with no additional resources to the ISU to create it. A voluntary contribution from Ireland allowed development of an improved database system which is now receiving more usage. The USA, the 1540 committee experts, the South Centre and the Stimson Center (as a ‘Guest of the Meeting’) took the floor, followed by Venezuela (on behalf of the non-aligned states), China, India, Switzerland, Brazil, UK, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Spain, Indonesia and Interpol.

The USA spoke to its paper (WP.9). The 1540 expert described the process for ‘matchmaking’ between assistance requests and providers that the committee uses. The South Centre outlined comparable arrangements in other forums such as the UN Technology Facilitation Mechanism and the Climate Technology Centre and Network (CTCN). The Stimson Center outlined its online database <<http://1540assistance.stimson.org/>> which details a number of assistance providers and which is being further developed. India noted that the Biosafety Clearing-House of the Cartagena Protocol to the Convention on Biological Diversity had taken a decade to fully develop. A number of interventions emphasised a desire to have the BWC as the focal point for assistance while at the same time there were acknowledgements that much assistance naturally flows through other channels, although in these latter cases the ISU could be informed of such activities. In this context it was important that the database was a politically neutral resource.

Obstacles and ways to overcome them

This sub-topic contained the most pronounced divergence of views, particularly on whether export controls caused denial of transfers of pathogens and equipment for peaceful purposes. Venezuela/NAM, Iran, China, Germany, Cuba, Chile, Angola, Russia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, UK, France, USA, Indonesia, India and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) took the floor.

Venezuela, for the non-aligned, called for the ‘full, effective and non-discriminatory implementation’ of Article X in similar terms to calls at earlier meetings, although it is not clear by what benchmark ‘full’ implementation would be measured. China highlighted the proposals it made in 2016 (WP.32, Eighth Review Conference) on a non-proliferation export control and international cooperation regime under the framework of the BWC. The UK and USA both emphasized how few export licence denials there were, while Brazil and Iran countered that some companies didn’t even consider certain possible exports on the assumption licences would not be granted and so the headline figures did not tell the full story. The OPCW presented its activities under Article XI of the Chemical Weapons Convention which has a similar underlying nature to BWC Article X.

In memoriam – Volker Beck

Just before the lunch break, the plenary was informed of the placing of a memorial book to celebrate the life of Volker Beck, a long-standing BW expert from Germany, at the back of the meeting room. This prompted words of appreciation for this NGO initiative from the German delegation who noted Volker’s substantial contributions to work within the BWC.

Side event

Russia convened a lunchtime event on Tuesday, entitled ‘Peptide vaccines: effective means to rapidly counter emerging biological hazards - Russia's synthetic peptide Ebola vaccine’, with presentations from Rospotrebnadzor [the country’s health protection agency].

This is the second report from the series of five BWC Meetings of Experts which are being held from 7 to 16 August 2018 in Geneva. Reports are posted to <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>> and <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>>. An email subscription link is available on each page.

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