

Monday 7th December 2009

The 2009 Meeting of States Parties: background to the meeting

The 2009 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) will complete the third year of the second inter-essional process for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC). The MSP was preceded by a one-week Meeting of Experts (MX) in August. The BWPP daily reports from the August MX and the 2006 Review Conference and the Meetings in 2007 and 2008 are available via the BWPP website at <http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>.

The topic for discussion at the MX and MSP this year is 'With a view to enhancing international cooperation, assistance and exchange in biological sciences and technology for peaceful purposes, promoting capacity building in the fields of disease surveillance, detection, diagnosis, and containment of infectious diseases: (1) for States Parties in need of assistance, identifying requirements and requests for capacity enhancement; and (2) from States Parties in a position to do so, and international organizations, opportunities for providing assistance related to these fields'. This topic was agreed at the Sixth Review Conference for the BWC which was held at the end of 2006. The MSP may also discuss 'universalisation and comprehensive implementation of the Convention', as agreed at the Sixth Review Conference.

By the weekend before the opening of the MSP, an advance copy of an ISU paper 'Background Information on Scientific and Technological Developments that may be Relevant to the Convention' had been placed on the ISU website, together with the draft agenda, draft programme of work, the annual report of the ISU and the Universalization report by the Chair of the Meeting. The advance release of papers allows for their contents to be considered before start of the Meeting.

The 2009 Meeting of Experts

The MX met at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland from 24 to 28 August 2009. A compilation of 'Considerations, Lessons, Perspectives, Recommendations, Conclusions and Proposals Drawn From the Presentations, Statements, Working Papers and Interventions on the Topics Under Discussion at the Meeting' was annexed to its formal report (document BWC/MSP/2009/MX/3, dated 16 October 2009). These ideas and suggestions were condensed into a 'Synthesis Paper' prepared by the Chairman and circulated to States Parties (BWC/MSP/2009/L.1, also dated 16 October 2009). These documents are available via the official BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) website <http://www.unog.ch/bwc> as well as via the UN documents server <http://documents.un.org>.

Issues of disease surveillance and containment

The use of biological weapons – whether in warfare or as a terrorist or criminal act – is nothing more than the deliberate use of disease. Countering this therefore includes questions of public health and reduction in the threat of all disease. There is much common ground in

responses to outbreaks of disease, whether they stem from natural, deliberate or accidental (such as a laboratory incident) causes.

Infectious diseases are not limited by political boundaries and outbreaks can spread not only between countries but across whole regions. A few can have a global spread. In recent years there has been a growing recognition that outbreaks of infectious disease have an impact far greater than simply the health of the individual, but have ramifications and implications for economic security of a country and even national security. With the global economic downturn, there are many officials concerned about the additional economic impact following the global spread of the new influenza A (H1N1) strain [commonly, although misleadingly, referred to as 'swine flu'].

It is worth noting that while infectious diseases such as influenza were prominent in interventions by diplomats from Western countries during the MX, the focus for many other diplomats was the significant impact that other infectious diseases such as malaria were having on the quality of life and economic activity in their countries.

Article X issues

The BWC contains a bargain, embodied in Article X of the Convention, which is the renunciation by States Parties of hostile uses of biological materials and technologies in return for freedom to gain the benefits of the peaceful uses of them. Security, economic and geographical considerations influence how individual governments see the balance between the two sides of this bargain. Most Western states have consistently put emphasis on the security aspects of the bargain, while states seeking greater economic development see access to peaceful uses as a key justification for using precious governmental resources in their engagement with the Convention. For example, during the MX, Cuba (on behalf of the non-aligned states) circulated a Working Paper on 'The Establishment of a Mechanism for the Full Implementation of Article X of the Convention' (BWC/MSP/2009/MX/WP.24, dated 25 August 2009). The paper states 'There are marked disparities that result from asymmetries in the development of the States Parties. The Article X of the Convention is a fundamental tool to overcome this situation.'

The BWC and its chemical equivalent

This year, the MSP is being held the week after the Conference of the States Parties (CSP) under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) which was held in The Hague where the CWC's institutional body, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), is located. In 2008, the CSP and the MSP were held in the same week; the CSP was unable to agree a final report and a Chairman's text was produced in its place. This year, the CSP did agree a final report, although this was not until 11pm on the final day.

Possible lessons are being learned from the BWC experience for the CWC context. The US statement to the CSP last Monday (30 November) included: 'we believe that holding some meetings to which all stakeholders are invited, along the lines of the very successful Experts Meetings for the Biological Weapons Convention, would pay real dividends to our work'. Australia's statement to the CSP spoke of the usefulness of seminars in which the participants can 'discuss and develop common understandings and promote effective action' – exactly the words used in the original mandate for the BWC Meetings agreed in 2002.

This is the first report from the Meeting of States Parties for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 7 to 11 December 2009 in Geneva. The reports are designed to help people who are not in Geneva to follow the proceedings.

The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) in co-operation with the Verification Research, Training and Information Centre (VERTIC). Copies are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>>.

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