

Thursday 10th December 2009

The Third Day: the mystery guest revealed

The 2009 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) continued on Wednesday with further discussion on capacity building in disease surveillance. The Meeting was chaired by Ambassador Grinius of Canada. The day also included an announcement by a previously unnamed senior official from a State Party and a presentation by the Moroccan Biosafety Association.

Most of the interventions on Wednesday morning's scheduled theme, 'Developing mechanisms for building capacity', had been given already as the MSP was running ahead of schedule. The next three scheduled themes were also covered during Wednesday's sessions: 'Developing the necessary infrastructure', 'Developing human resources' and 'Developing standard operating procedures'. Belgium, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine took the floor for the first time in this Meeting during Wednesday's sessions.

Wednesday saw the end of the Programme dedicated to the topic of this year's meetings (apart from one presentation announced for Thursday owing to the travel commitments of the expert giving it). The remaining MSP sessions will discuss such matters as universalization activities, the report of the Implementation Support Unit, and drafting its own final report (the draft procedural elements of which were circulated on Wednesday).

Discussion and debate

As with the earlier sessions, the interventions on the themes ended up rather intermingled. Some countries offered specific recent experiences of dealing with infectious diseases from which lessons could be drawn. India and Ukraine, for example, both provided details of their responses to the 2009 strain of H1N1 outbreaks. In these situations, prompt identification of infected individuals and efforts to reduce contact between people to reduce transmission rates helped control the spread of the disease. South Africa commented that the issue of treatment for infectious disease was not explicitly covered within the Synthesis Paper and noted that identification and diagnosis of a disease without treatment does not allow for effective disease management. The delegate making this observation was a qualified clinician. The UK also referred to the treatment issue and noted this not only needed its own infrastructure but that supply of treatments needed to be sustainable. The UK then reinforced a point made many times during the August Meeting of Experts that good infrastructure is useless without having available personnel with relevant skills. Belgium commended the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) database as a means of coordinating assistance activities.

Launch of US biothreats policy

As expected, US Under Secretary of State Ellen Tauscher addressed the MSP to launch the 'National Strategy for Countering Biological Threats'. The speech, and a link to the Strategy document, can be found at <<http://www.state.gov/t/us/133335.htm>>.

The Strategy, which comes with the endorsement of President Obama, is contained in a 23-page document which elaborates the challenges of biological threats clearly and

concisely. The solutions suggested to deal with these challenges are not always very specific, but they are of a nature that would allow future policy to be adapted in a number of ways. This open nature of what is proposed is in stark contrast to earlier elaborations of policy that were far more focused on what would not be allowed. The Strategy 'is targeted to reduce biological threats by: (1) improving global access to the life sciences to combat infectious disease regardless of its cause; (2) establishing and reinforcing norms against the misuse of the life sciences; and (3) instituting a suite of coordinated activities that collectively will help influence, identify, inhibit, and/or interdict those who seek to misuse the life sciences'.

There is a specific section on 'revitalizing' the Convention which contains little new of substance although it is written in much more positive terms than many US statements of the past decade. However, the tone may jar with those delegates who feel it was actions of the US that led to the BWC being in the doldrums before its reinvigoration in 2006. The document notes: 'The tone, tenor, and quality of the United States Government's efforts and that of our international partners will be important to determine our mutual success'.

The Under Secretary announced the US would 'work towards' the public posting of future annual Confidence-Building Measure (CBM) returns and expressed a hope to revisit to the BWC for the Review Conference in 2011. The Under Secretary included an unambiguous statement in her speech that the US 'will not seek to revive negotiations on a verification protocol'. While such language will not please those who are in favour of a protocol, there are benefits in having this policy explicitly stated; any ambiguity may have led to the raising of false hopes for some.

The last time a policy statement was made by a US official at this level to a BWC meeting was by John Bolton in November 2001. For those who were not fans of the Bolton policy, the Tauscher policy will represent an improvement. However, even without a high-level announcement since 2001, US policy has evolved considerably during this period. While the Strategy and the speech are expressed in positive language towards the BWC; the answer to whether this represents a significant step change in US policy evolution or is simply a repackaging of the existing situation will only be provided once the Strategy is acted upon.

The US Strategy will be revisited in the 'reflections' section of the final MSP report to be published next week and posted at <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>>.

Side events

A seminar on the biological aspects of the G-8 Global Partnership Programme was convened by Canada, the UK and the USA before the morning session. John Griffin (Canada, Global Partnership Biological Program Officer), Stephen Lynagh (US Department of State Global Partnership Coordinator) and Jo Adamson (UK Deputy Permanent Representative in Geneva) described relevant activities of each of their countries. Amb. Grinius also spoke briefly. Background information can be found at <<http://www.international.gc.ca/>>.

A lunchtime seminar was held by the Permanent Mission of Romania together with the ISU on 'Scientific Research and Exchange - Potential Impact on Non-Proliferation Measures for Biological Agents'. Introductions were given by Ambassador Maria Ciobanu (Romania) and Richard Lennane (ISU). Presentations on implications of developments in the life sciences were given by Marian Negut (Director, Cantacuzino Institute, Bucharest), Piers Millett (ISU) and Kathryn Nixdorff (International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility). This was the first gathering of the MSP, either in the main conference room or in the room for side events, that did not include Ambassador Grinius on the podium!

This is the fourth 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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