

Monday 6th December 2010

The 2010 Meeting of States Parties: responding to deliberate disease

The 2010 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) is the concluding part of the second inter-sessional process for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC). This process was established by the Sixth Review Conference of the BWC which was held at the end of 2006. This means that the MSP is the last BWC meeting to discuss substantive issues prior to the convening of the Seventh BWC Review Conference in 2011. The BWPP daily reports from the 2006 Review Conference and the subsequent meetings in 2007 through 2010 are available via the BWPP website at <http://www.bwpp.org>.

The topic for discussion this year is 'Provision of assistance and coordination with relevant organizations upon request by any State Party in the case of alleged use of biological or toxin weapons, including improving national capabilities for disease surveillance, detection and diagnosis and public health systems'. The topic for this year was selected by the Sixth Review Conference for the BWC which was held at the end of 2006. This year's meetings are chaired by Ambassador Pedro Oyarce of Chile.

The draft agenda, the draft programme of work, the annual report of the BWC's Implementation Support Unit (ISU) and the Universalization report have been published and can be found via the ISU website <http://www.unog.ch/bwc>; official documents of the meeting can also be found via the UN documents server <http://documents.un.org>.

The Meeting of Experts

The MSP was preceded by a one-week Meeting of Experts (MX) held at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland from 23 to 27 August. The MX produced a number of ideas and suggestions which were annexed to its formal report. These ideas and suggestions were condensed into a 'Synthesis Paper' prepared by the Chair and circulated to States Parties (BWC/MSP/2010/L.1, dated 18 October 2010).

Deliberate disease issues

The use of biological weapons may be summarized by the simple phrase 'deliberate disease'. Distinguishing between a natural occurrence of disease and an outbreak that has been deliberately induced may not always be a simple matter. In both cases, there may be considerable public health problems and a significant humanitarian catastrophe.

Responses to the alleged use of biological weapons should be capable of trying to find answers to a number of questions that go beyond the identification of a disease and its method of transmission in a natural outbreak. For example, even if a disease might sometimes naturally occur in an area, there may be questions about whether the spread of the disease in a particular situation had been artificially enhanced. A further set of questions

would relate to whether there was any evidence of a delivery system, including a vector [such as an insect], used to spread the disease.

These questions may not be as simple as they seem at first sight as many answers to them would have to be distinguished from other possibilities that may appear to be very similar – such as a different, perhaps naturally occurring, illness that results in similar symptoms. However, answers to all of these questions would be needed to be able to deal in the most effective manner with a public health emergency that had been caused by the deliberate spread of disease as well as potentially contributing to identifying who might have caused the spread.

The Seventh BWC Review Conference

As the 2010 meetings are the last of the current inter-sessional process, this naturally leads to thoughts about what should happen in the BWC Review Conference that is to be held in 2011.

The five-yearly Review Conferences provide an opportunity for the BWC States Parties to consider all aspects of the Convention and its implementation. The Fifth Review Conference, opened in 2001, was unable to agree a final position owing to considerable disagreements between the States Parties relating to the negotiations that had been taking place on a protocol intended to strengthen the BWC. Earlier that year the US had announced it would be unable to accept any product from those negotiations, effectively bringing the talks to a halt. The Fifth Review Conference was suspended and reconvened in 2002 when it agreed to a series of meetings between Review Conferences that has now become known as the inter-sessional process. The Sixth Review Conference, held in 2006, was able to carry out a substantial review of the Convention and to agree a final document. However, this consensus was achieved by leaving some subjects areas off the agenda; most notably, the issue of verification.

With the Seventh Review Conference on the horizon, many governments and commentators are already doing some forward thinking on relevant subjects. A number of conferences, seminars and other gatherings have been held to consider issues relating to the Review Conference; these include a Wilton Park conference in the UK in September, two conferences (back-to-back) in Beijing in November, and a Pugwash Study Group meeting the weekend before the MSP. The political significance of the BWC and the review have been recognised within governments; for example, on the Friday before the MSP, the White House announced that Ambassador Laura Kennedy, the US Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament, had been appointed ‘US Special Representative for Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC) Issues’.

No formal decisions have yet been taken on the Review Conference. Ambassador Paul van den IJssel (Netherlands) has been nominated as President for the Conference and it has been proposed that the Conference be held during 5-22 December [Friday 23 December is a UN holiday so there would be no support facilities in the building; the Chemical Weapons Convention Conference of the States Parties is to be held in the Hague during 28 November-2 December]. It is expected that a formal decision on the President, the dates and the budget for the Conference will be taken by the MSP this week. Further decisions needed in relation to the Conference can be taken at a Preparatory Committee that is likely to meet in April.

This is the first report from the Meeting of States Parties for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 6 to 10 December 2010 in Geneva. The reports are designed to help people who are not in Geneva to follow the proceedings. Copies are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>>.

The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). Financial assistance for this project has been provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Sweden.

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