

Monday 1st December 2014

The 2014 Meeting of States Parties: background and issues

The 2014 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) is the third such meeting in the third inter-sessional process for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC). It was preceded by a week-long Meeting of Experts (MX) held during August. These meetings are established by the five-yearly BWC Review Conferences, in this case by a decision adopted at the Seventh Review Conference in 2011. The inter-sessional meetings are intended to be practical and focused on developing ‘common understandings and effective action’. The 2014 meetings are chaired by Ambassador Urs Schmid of Switzerland. There are also two Vice-Chairs – Ambassador Mazlan Muhammad of Malaysia and, for the MSP, Ambassador György Molnár of Hungary, who replaces Judit Körömi of Hungary, Special Representative of the Foreign Minister for Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, who was Vice-Chair during the MX.

It is notable that the MSP is opening on World AIDS Day and while the outbreak of Ebola virus disease (EVD) in west Africa continues. Both are reminders that the possibilities of the hostile uses of disease, together with the hazards posed by natural outbreaks of disease, are challenges that need to be tackled through international cooperation.

Topics under discussion during the 2014 meetings

Three topics are standing agenda items for the third inter-sessional process: ‘Cooperation and assistance, with a particular focus on strengthening cooperation and assistance under Article X’; ‘Review of developments in the field of science and technology related to the Convention’; and ‘Strengthening national implementation’. For this year and next year the meetings also discuss ‘How to strengthen implementation of Article VII, including consideration of detailed procedures and mechanisms for the provision of assistance and cooperation by States Parties’. In addition, the MSPs also have the annual report of the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) and universality of the Convention as items for discussion.

Article X of the Convention relates to access to the life sciences, and materials and equipment related to them, for peaceful purposes. This embodies a bargain that the renunciation of biological weapons and the control of the hostile uses of the life sciences should be implemented to allow access to the use of the life sciences for peaceful purposes. Many divergences of opinion relating to Article X issues have been evident over the years.

The BWC operates within a rapidly changing science and technology (S&T) context owing to rapid advances in the life sciences. While many officials within governments are very experienced at understanding changing political contexts, many are less experienced at assessing implications of changing S&T contexts. The changing S&T context relevant to the BWC leads to changes in the nature of challenges the Convention may need to counter as well as providing new opportunities for peaceful uses.

Improving national implementation of the BWC has long been regarded as an important way of enhancing effectiveness of the overall regime to control biological weapons.

BWC Article VII deals with the provision of ‘assistance’ if a State Party is ‘exposed to danger’ because of a breach of the Convention. No country is likely to have at its immediate disposal all of the resources to respond to a severe biological attack.

Implementation Support Unit staffing changes

The ISU is the body established by each of the last two BWC Review Conferences to support States Parties by carrying out a variety of functions such as administrative support for BWC meetings, national implementation support, and the exchange of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs). The new Head of the ISU is Daniel Feakes who was formerly Strategy and Policy Adviser within the Technical Secretariat of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), based in The Hague.

Preparations for the MSP

The report of the MX (MX/3), the Chair’s Synthesis Paper summarizing ideas raised at the MX (L.1), and a paper on ‘Draft elements for inclusion in the Report of the Meeting of States Parties’ (L.2), have been circulated as formal documents. Working Papers circulated thus far are: ‘Article VII: Analysis of existing resources and gaps, and recommendations for future actions’ (USA, WP.1); and ‘Strengthening national implementation: elements of an effective export control system’ (27 States Parties, WP.2). Papers on general information for participants (ISU, INF.1) and on ‘International organizations that may be involved in the provision of and coordination of assistance relevant to Article VII’ (ISU, INF.2) have been circulated. Advance versions of papers yet to be released as formal documents include: ‘Mechanisms to monitor BTWC implementation’ (Canada, Chile, Mexico, and USA), ‘Perspectives on Article VII (South Africa), ‘Confidence and Compliance with the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention: Workshop Report’ (UK), and ‘Report on Implementation of Article X of the Convention’ (India). The advance release of papers allows for their contents to be considered before the start of the MSP.

The ISU annual report includes details of 90 national contact points and details of participation in the CBMs. As of 15 September, 67 States Parties had provided CBM returns this year, compared with 69 returns in 2012 and 65 in 2013. Of the CBMs submitted up to 15 September, 23 have been made public at the request of those submitting. The annual report on activities to promote universality notes that no country has ratified or acceded to the BWC thus far during 2014, so the total number of States Parties remains at 170.

All these papers can be found via the ISU website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>; official documents can also be found via the UN documents server <<http://documents.un.org>> (numbers for official documents for this meeting all start BWC/MSP/2014/). Additional papers are likely to be issued during the MSP.

About these reports

Starting from the Sixth Review Conference in 2006, the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) has produced daily reports from each of the BWC meetings. The reports were initially designed to help people who were not in Geneva to follow the proceedings but are now also widely circulated each morning amongst delegates. Six reports will be produced during this MSP, starting with this setting the scene report. A report will be produced covering each day’s activities, the last of which will be circulated electronically after the MSP has concluded. If you would like to be added to the mailing list please contact the author via the details given at the bottom of this page. The BWPP daily reports from the 2006 and 2011 Review Conferences, as well as those from the annual meetings in between and after, are available via the BWPP website at <<http://www.bwpp.org>>.

This is the first report from the Meeting of States Parties for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 1 to 5 December 2014 in Geneva.

The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BWPP. He can be contacted during the MSP on +41 76 507 1026 or <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.