

Wednesday 3rd December 2014

The second day: cooperation & assistance and science & technology

The 2014 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) continued on Tuesday with the conclusion of the general debate and sessions focused on 'Cooperation and assistance, with a particular focus on strengthening cooperation and assistance under Article X' and 'Review of developments in the field of science and technology related to the Convention'. Ambassador Urs Schmid of Switzerland chaired the morning session, handing over the role to Vice-Chair Ambassador Mazlan Muhammad of Malaysia for the afternoon.

Conclusion of the general debate

General debate statements were made at the start of the morning session by Ukraine, Ireland, Jordan (first BWC plenary statement since 1996), Burkina Faso, Indonesia, Zambia (first ever BWC plenary statement), and the European Union [as an international organization].

Many of the issues raised were similar to those raised on Monday. Issues of global politics entered the room. Ukraine indicated that its biosafety arrangements had been affected by the loss of an 'anti-plague station' that is on the territory of Crimea. Russia, asserting its right of reply, suggested that raising this was politicizing issues. Ukraine, asserting a right of reply in return, denied this. A similar exchange also took place in the afternoon during the science and technology session. Jordan spoke of the issues surrounding proposals for a Middle East zone free of WMD.

Cooperation and assistance

Proceedings on this agenda item started with a briefing from the Implementation Support Unit on the Article X assistance database. It noted two new requests for assistance had appeared this year as well as one new offer. The offers section of the database was opened up to general access from February 2014. The UK and Australia took the floor on offers of assistance and Thailand suggested there may be benefits of having a roster of experts on the database that could be consulted. Later interventions suggested that the database may benefit from being made more user-friendly and highlighted other countries' offers of assistance.

Proceedings moved on to the overall topic. Iran (for the non-aligned), Brazil, Malaysia, Pakistan, Mexico, Germany, Switzerland, USA, Australia, Republic of Korea, Ecuador, Russia, China, Cuba, Canada, UK, Netherlands, Thailand and India took the floor before lunch. Proceedings continued in the afternoon with interventions from Iran (national), Ghana, Ethiopia (first plenary statement in an inter-sessional meeting), France and Japan. Reporting here includes some information from general debate statements given on Monday.

The extent to which Article X is implemented remains a subject for which there are divergent views. Iran, for the non-aligned, noted that Article X had been 'a priority for a long time' and there needed to be 'full and non-discriminatory implementation' of its provisions. There were reminders of earlier proposals such as the Article X implementation action plan proposed at the Sixth Review Conference (WP.39) and the implementation mechanism proposal from 2009 (MX/WP.24). Ecuador described a need for 'unconditional

implementation', a reference to opposition to the use of informal arrangements between states regarding transfer controls such as the Australia Group.

A number of developed countries spoke of their cooperation and assistance activities. Some of these related to support for Ebola-affected countries, two of which are not BWC States Parties – Guinea and Liberia. The USA suggested that cooperation and assistance should be more than the work of governments and that much might be achieved by 'unleashing' the private sector. South-South cooperation was also highlighted; for example, India noted the recent offer by its Prime Minister for support for a regional reference laboratory. Malaysia and Thailand referred to regional workshops, on responses to biological risks and on biosafety issues, respectively. Australia, Canada, Germany, India and USA referred to their published or forthcoming reports on Article X implementation.

Science & technology (S&T)

The proceedings on S&T issues followed on immediately from the cooperation and assistance proceedings. There were interventions from: Iran (for the non-aligned), Russia, Switzerland, Pakistan, Mexico, Australia, UK, Ukraine, India, Ecuador, Brazil, USA, Japan and Cuba. Reporting here includes some information from general debate statements given on Monday.

Some delegations focused on the potential dangers posed by S&T advances, some on potential benefits, and some a mix of the two. Highlighted perceived dangers included advances in synthetic biology and 'gain of function' research [research that enhances, for example, the ability for an influenza virus to be transmitted more easily between mammals]. Highlighted perceived benefits included significant public health possibilities; for example, more rapid and cheaper development and manufacture of vaccines would lead to a significant reduction in impact of infectious disease, both on a human level and in economic terms.

There were many uses of terms such as 'responsible research' and 'research of concern' but there seemed to be some variance in perspective as to where the boundary between such concepts might lie. This could need further work before a common understanding might be reached.

Convergence between scientific disciplines, and in particular between biology and chemistry, was raised, noting implications for the operation of the relevant conventions.

Education and awareness efforts and the promulgation of codes of conduct were described as making a contribution to oversight of research. References were made to a new working paper on codes that has been submitted to this MSP by Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Spain, Italy and Mexico.

Switzerland followed up on its call for new S&T review arrangements it had put forward in August. Japan noted working paper WP.13 submitted to the Seventh Review Conference in 2011 with Australia and New Zealand on an annual S&T review process.

Side events

Two side events were held in parallel at lunchtime. One was on training for the UN Secretary-General's mechanism used to investigate allegations of use of biological weapons and was convened by the UK. Introductory remarks were given by Ambassador Michael Biontino (Germany) and Ulf Lindell (Sweden). Presentations were given by Anders Norqvist, (FOI, Sweden), Mick Hoare (UK Police CBRN Centre), Christine Uhlenhaut (Robert Koch Institute, Germany). The event was chaired by Ambassador Matthew Rowland (UK).

The other was on the electronic system for submitting Confidence-Building Measures, convened by the EU and the ISU. Introductory remarks were given by Nico Frandi (EU). The electronic system was demonstrated by Kevin Jutuah (UN IT office). The event was chaired by Karin Hjalmarsson (UN Office for Disarmament Affairs).

This is the third report from the Meeting of States Parties for the Biological Weapons Convention being held from 1 to 5 December 2014 in Geneva. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) and are available via the BWPP website at <<http://www.bwpp.org>>. The author can be contacted during the Meeting of States Parties on +41 76 507 1026 or <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.