

Tuesday 19th August 2008

The 2008 Meeting of Experts: The Opening Day

The 2008 Meeting of Experts (MX) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC/BWC) opened as scheduled on Monday morning, with Ambassador Georgi Avramchev (The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) in the Chair.

The meeting started with the usual administrative decisions such as the adoption of the agenda, the programme of work and participation in the meeting. Normally these sessions are considered the most mundane elements of such meetings and pass without incident. However, the meeting had been less than a few minutes old when extremely loud construction noise started, forcing a suspension of the meeting. The construction work was delayed for a few hours to allow the morning's meeting to continue. This also provided enough time to prepare another meeting room for use in the afternoon so that the construction work and the MX could each continue without interfering with each other.

General debate

After the administrative arrangements had been dealt with, States Parties then had the chance to make 'introductory statements'. This is equivalent to the 'general debate' session in other inter-governmental meetings and offers the chance for States Parties to make open statements. However, as it was clear some time ago that there would be other chances for delegations to make on-the-record statements on the specific topics under discussion, many introductory statements were of a general nature; although there were a number of previews of more detailed presentations to be made later or of working papers to be introduced.

Statements were made in the morning (in the following order) by France (on behalf of the EU and associated states), Cuba (on behalf of the NAM states parties to the BTWC), Pakistan, South Africa, Japan, United States, Russia, China, Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Nigeria, Libya and Iran. In the afternoon, statements were made by Peru, Colombia, Albania, India, Germany, Georgia and Morocco. Statements that were circulated at the meeting in hard copy are being posted on the BWPP website at the address given overleaf. Some States Parties that would normally have made introductory statements at earlier MXs declined the opportunity this time in order to allow more time later for detailed presentations on specific subjects. The statements were almost entirely positive in tone. Where the statements had any negative tone in relation to biological issues, they were mostly in connection with the scope of the challenges that the control of the hostile uses of the life sciences represent. A notable exception was the statement by Georgia which was focused on the military situation in that country. Russia, exercising its right of reply, said that subjects not relevant to the agenda of the meeting should not be introduced.

Many statements noted that the nature of the issues under discussion meant that there were many benefits in learning from each other's experiences. A number included details of new biosafety or biosecurity measures adopted or undertaken by states parties or of

particular efforts for education and outreach, such as seminars or other events – an example of this was the statement by Pakistan which outlined a number of initiatives taken domestically. Some raised concerns that controls on biosafety and biosecurity should not hamper legitimate uses of the life sciences. Notably, the Cuba/NAM statement suggested that codes of conduct ‘should avoid any restrictions on exchange of scientific discoveries in the field of biology for prevention of disease and other peaceful purposes’ – a specific concern that does not seem to have been raised earlier. Russia noted that codes were not suited to preventing state-run offensive biological programmes – which it sees as the greatest threat to the Convention – and that there was a need to return to international negotiations on verification. The United States indicated its intention to provide funding through the OECD to develop laboratory biosecurity risk assessment guidelines and a plan to sponsor a workshop in 2009 to review progress on education and awareness raising.

After the completion of the statements by States Parties there was a short presentation by the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) which was also made on behalf of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO).

NGO statements

Following the OIE presentation, the formal meeting was suspended to allow non-governmental organizations to make statements to the participants in the MX. Statements were made, in the following order, by the BioWeapons Prevention Project; Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation Scientists Working Group on Biological and Chemical Weapons; Center for International Security Studies at Maryland; Institute for Security Studies; Landau Network-Centro Volta & University of Bradford; London School of Economics; National Defense Medical College of Japan & University of Bradford; Pax Christi; University of Exeter; Verification Research Training and Information Centre (VERTIC); and the Asia Pacific Centre for Military Law. Copies of these statements will be posted on the BWPP website at the address given below.

Side Event

Monday’s lunchtime seminar, entitled ‘Synthetic Biology: Engineering Life Science’, was convened by the Geneva Forum together with the BTWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU). This was the first side event of this Meeting of Experts.

The presenters were Piers Millett of the ISU and Robert M Friedman of the J. Craig Venter Institute. The seminar was introduced by Patrick McCarthy of the Geneva Forum. The first presentation took a novel approach, including the use of a number of video clips, to help delegates understand the developments in synthetic biology – essentially new techniques to not only manipulate but also to manufacture basic building blocks of life. The second presentation introduced a recent report, entitled ‘Synthetic Genomics – Options for Governance’, that is based on the results from a group of specially convened experts examining the implications of the new developments and which policy tools would be most suitable to reduce the possibility they might be used for hostile purposes. The report can be found at <<http://www.jcvi.org/cms/research/projects/syngen-options/overview/>>.

This is the second report from the Meeting of Experts for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 18 to 22 August 2008 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 Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy. Copies of these reports are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/2008MX/MX2008Resources.html>> or <<http://www.acronym.org.uk>>.

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