

Wednesday 20th August 2008

The 2008 Meeting of Experts: The Second Day

The 2008 Meeting of Experts (MX) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC/BWC) continued on Tuesday morning, with Ambassador Georgi Avramchev (The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) in the Chair. However, the activities of the day started an hour earlier than usual with the holding of a 'poster session' – the first time this has happened at a BTWC meeting (see side events section overleaf).

The morning's formal proceedings started with the first of three themed sessions on the first of the topics under discussion at this year's meeting. The theme was 'concepts of biosafety and biosecurity'. The intention had been to hear from intergovernmental organizations, followed by States Parties, then convene a panel of people from the private sector and conclude with presentations from 'guests of the meeting' – specially invited individuals from professional associations and scientific bodies. While the meeting got through a considerable number of presentations and discussions, this timetable could not be kept to owing to the sheer number of requests for the floor.

Intergovernmental organizations gave presentations in the following order: the World Health Organization, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United Nations Environment Programme/Global Environment Facility, and the European Commission (DG SANCO).

The morning session was completed with presentations from Canada, United States, Switzerland, Indonesia and Germany. After lunch, presentations continued from: Nigeria, Denmark, Cuba (speaking in its national capacity rather than as NAM coordinator), United Kingdom, Pakistan, Bulgaria, Norway and India. After the private sector panel, South Africa, Argentina, Australia, Ukraine and Morocco gave their presentations.

The level of detail in the presentations is substantially greater than in previous years and indicates a level of engagement within countries on BTWC-related issues. To take an example, the presentation of Morocco illustrated the involvement of many participants in the domestic developments of policies relating to this year's topics for the MX. Other countries highlighted the particular contexts they have to work within, such as Nigeria reminding delegates of the high level of naturally occurring infectious disease in its region. There is also a much greater level of openness in this year's MX, with all of the sessions thus far being held in public.

Private sector panel

At around 4.30pm, Ambassador Avramchev introduced a panel of four experts from the private sector. The panelists were Gary Burns (AstraZeneca, but indicated his statement was endorsed by Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry [ABPI]), John Keddie

(GlaxoSmithKline), Robert Friedman (J. Craig Venter Institute), and Shrikumar Suryanarayan (Association of Biotechnology Led Enterprises of India [ABLE]). The format of this session was very similar to that of the NGO roundtable held on the opening day of the Meeting of States Parties last December in that each panelist gave a brief statement and there was then an on-going question and answer session, the first part of which consisted of questions from the Chairman himself.

The panel session lasted around an hour. Further panels on biosafety and biosecurity risk management and on education and awareness are scheduled for Wednesday and Thursday.

Poster session

A poster session, consisting of 16 posters from a variety of sources such as States Parties, professional bodies and NGOs on the subjects of biosafety and biosecurity, was held before the start of the morning's meetings. This kind of session was an innovation as nothing like this has been held at BTWC meetings previously. [For those not familiar with poster sessions at scientific conferences, they take the form of posters on display boards. The authors of each poster stand next to it and so can engage with delegates who are interested in the information they have provided.] Delegates found the opportunity for focused, yet informal, interaction very useful. BWPP is exploring ways that information from the poster session can be made available to those who had been unable to attend. A second poster session will be held on Thursday morning on the education and outreach topic.

The role of guidelines

It became clear during the day's sessions that there are some differing understandings of the concept of guidelines, especially with regard to whether they have legal force. In the case of the UK legal system, to take an example, guidelines are commonly used to establish principles for aspects of occupational health and safety as each situation has to be evaluated on its merits, making detailed regulation difficult. Such guidelines have a form of legislative effect as, if there happened to be a workplace accident, any prosecution (and possible penalties if found guilty) would take into account of whether relevant guidelines had been followed. If guidelines had not been followed, the defence would then have to show why such guidelines had not been considered.

Side Event

Tuesday's lunchtime seminar, entitled 'Dual-Use at the Cutting Edge: What to do about Oversight?', was convened by a group of European academic bodies. The seminar was introduced by Ambassador Avramchev (The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia). The presenters were Alexander Kelle (University of Bath), Kathryn Nixdorff (Darmstadt University of Technology), David Friedman (Institute for National Security Studies), Elisa Harris (Center for International Security Studies at Maryland). The seminar was moderated by Malcolm Dando (University of Bradford).

This is the third 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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