

Thursday 21st August 2008

The 2008 Meeting of Experts: The Third Day

The 2008 Meeting of Experts (MX) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC/BWC) continued on Wednesday, with Ambassador Georgi Avramchev (The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) in the Chair. Once again the activities of the day started an hour early with the holding of an additional side event before the day's usual proceedings as all lunchtime slots for such events had been filled.

The morning's formal proceedings started with the continuation of the theme of 'concepts of biosafety and biosecurity' with the last presentation on the subject by a State Party which was given by Germany. This was followed by a number of presentations from representatives of scientific bodies as 'Guests of the Meeting': the American Biological Safety Association, the Asia Pacific Biosafety Association, the European Biological Safety Association, the Inter Academy Panel for International Issues, the International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility (INES), the International Union of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology and ABSA Canada.

The scientific bodies have spread of perspectives. The biosafety associations are focused on sharing experiences and finding best practice. The Inter Academy Panel has a working group on biosecurity which drafted a 'Statement on Biosecurity' which now has over 70 academies of sciences signed up to it. INES stressed that biosecurity needs to be seen as wider than just physical security.

In the afternoon the focus of discussion moved onto 'biosafety and biosecurity capacity building' with presentations from intergovernmental organizations followed by States Parties. Presentations were given (in the following order) by the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB), the UN Security Council 1540 Committee, the World Health Organization (WHO), France (on behalf of the EU), United States, Japan, China, Nigeria, United Kingdom, Indonesia, Norway, Cuba (in its national capacity), Australia, Turkey, Malaysia, Argentina and Sudan.

The presentations and consequent question and answer sessions illustrated how broad the subject of capacity building is. For example, the ICGEB emphasised that capacity building is more than simply provision of training. France, for the EU, spoke of the new Joint Action supporting the WHO in biosafety and biosecurity activities. Nigeria spoke of the need to build capacity to support disaster management. The UK highlighted how the implementation of new legislation had built up the capacity of laboratories in that country to protect dangerous pathogens. Indonesia illustrated the difficulties of establishing its first level-3 laboratory and Norway spoke of its assistance in the establishment of that laboratory.

Risk management panel

At around noon, Ambassador Avramchev introduced a panel of six experts on the subject of biosafety and biosecurity risk management. The panelists were May Chu (WHO), Iain

Gillespie (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), Keith Hamilton (World Organization for Animal Health [OIE]), Paul Huntly (Det Norske Veritas), Brooke Rogers (King's College London) and Cathy Roth (WHO). The format of this session was like that of the private sector panel on Tuesday and continued to the lunch break.

The discussion included distinctions between methods of quantitative and qualitative risk assessment methods. It was also noted that 'risk communication' should not necessarily be counted as a separate activity as good communication of risks should be carried at all stages of risk management. While the panel was useful for many delegations to help promote common understandings, it may have been too detailed for some.

Side Events

Two side events were held on Wednesday – one early in the morning and one at lunchtime. The morning seminar was convened by the International Biosafety Working Group (IBWG) and focused on the roles that biosafety associations can perform. The presenters were Ursula Jenal (European Biological Safety Association), Mary Louise Graham (ABSA Canada), Christina Thompson (American Biological Safety Association) and Gary Burns (AstraZeneca, but who spoke on the Pharmaceutical Biosafety Group). The seminar was moderated by Heather Sheeley (IBWG). Further information on the IBWG can be found at <<http://www.internationalbiosafety.org/>>, which includes links to the bodies represented above.

The lunchtime seminar was convened by the BWPP. The seminar offered an opportunity for the BWPP and some of its network members to inform delegations of their activities. The presenters were Kathryn Nixdorff (INES), Alan Pearson (Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Scientists Working Group on Biological and Chemical Weapons), Gert Harigel (Geneva International Peace Research Institute), Sergey Batsanov (Pugwash International) and Kathryn McLaughlin (BWPP). The seminar was moderated by Marie Chevrier (Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Scientists Working Group on Biological and Chemical Weapons) who chairs the BWPP board.

Coupland prize

At the lunchtime seminar, the BWPP launched the Coupland Prize competition as a new initiative to raise awareness of the dangers of the misuse of the biological sciences in a way designed to appeal to the next generation of life science practitioners. The competition is open to undergraduate students in any country engaged in the study of life science disciplines. To enter, they should imagine how they would draft a letter, no more than 800 words long, to their University Dean explaining why the BTWC should be included as a mandatory component in the curricula of undergraduate courses in the life sciences. The first prize is US\$2000 with a runner-up prize of US\$800.

The award is named after Robin Coupland who is funding the prize money from the proceeds of the sales of his paintings from the exhibition *XXYX: the Biology of Love*. Robin's paintings can be viewed at <www.pic2d.com/robincoupland>.

More information on the competition can be found on the BWPP website.

This is the fourth 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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