

Friday 22nd August 2008

The 2008 Meeting of Experts: The Fourth Day

The 2008 Meeting of Experts (MX) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC/BWC) continued on Thursday, with Ambassador Georgi Avramchev (The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) in the Chair. This was the day that activities moved from the first topic of this year's MX on biosafety/biosecurity to the second – ‘Oversight, education, awareness raising, and adoption and/or development of codes of conduct with the aim of preventing misuse in the context of advances in bio-science and bio-technology research with the potential of use for purposes prohibited by the Convention’. This changeover of topic had been scheduled for Wednesday afternoon.

The morning’s formal proceedings started with the last presentations on biosafety and biosecurity. Presentations were heard from Canada (with a co-presenter from the Kyrgyz Republic), France, Cameroon, and France. The Canadian-Kyrgyz presentation described a joint project for a laboratory in the latter country as a capacity building project as part of Canada’s support for the G8 Global Partnership programme and emphasized that good biosafety and biosecurity arrangements are not just a question how a laboratory is established, but are on-going processes. Cameroon, which is not yet a State Party, provided an illustration of its preparations for joining and implementing the BTWC. The two French papers were on setting standards and biosafety risk management.

The rest of the morning’s formal proceedings were dedicated to the theme of ‘oversight of science’, with presentations from the United States, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry, and the World Health Organization. After lunch, presentations continued with the US National Academy of Sciences, Pakistan, Cuba (in its national capacity) and Brazil. The presentations illustrated that there is substantial overlap between biosafety/biosecurity and oversight of science. For example, the US detailed the activities of the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity. Japan spoke of its lessons learned from the experiences of dealing with the Aum Shinrikyo group’s efforts in the biological field and how these can be applied to discouraging people with scientific expertise from getting involved in such activities. Germany spoke on security vetting of people handling dangerous pathogens.

Although the next theme on the programme of work was education and awareness raising, the Chairman allowed Germany to give a presentation on codes of conduct as the visiting expert was due to depart. The presentation focused on the role of funding bodies in encouraging codes of conduct and other best practice in BTWC-relevant areas in academic research.

France, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, United States, and the UN Security Council 1540 committee then addressed the meeting on education and awareness raising. While most NGO representatives had assumed this subject would relate to awareness raising for practising scientists or students of science, the US chose to talk about synthetic biology

and the 1540 committee spoke about awareness raising of 1540 within states. Switzerland introduced a pamphlet entitled ‘Biology for Peace: Preventing the Misuse of the Life Sciences’ which can be downloaded from <<http://www.seco.admin.ch/dokumentation/publikation/>>. The UK reported on the results of a seminar it held with academia in March.

Education and awareness panel

In the late afternoon, Ambassador Avramchev introduced a panel of four experts on the subject of education and awareness raising. The panelists were Robin Coupland (International Committee of the Red Cross), John Crowley (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), Decio Ripandelli (International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology), Terence Taylor (International Council of the Life Sciences & Global Health and Security Initiative). The format of this session mirrored that of the other panels held earlier in the week, although time constraints reduced the period available for questions and answers.

Draft report

The draft of the procedural section of the final report was circulated, together with a first draft of the Chairman’s compendium of recommendations and other ideas so far expressed during the MX which is to be appended to the report. In recent MXs there has been no controversy about these reports.

Poster session

A poster session, in a similar format to that held on Tuesday morning, was held on Thursday morning on the second topic of the MX. A comment from one delegate was that he found it very useful as he could take time to interpret the technical details on the posters which were not in his native language at his own speed and have somebody there he could ask questions of. The Implementation Support Unit has asked poster providers to supply an electronic copy of each poster so that these can be put on the ISU website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>.

Side Events

The lunchtime seminar was convened by a group of scientific academies to report on the *Second International Forum on Biosecurity* held in Budapest during 30 March-2 April this year. The seminar was moderated by Sergio Pastrana (Cuban Academy of Sciences) and Barbara Schaal (US National Academy of Sciences [NAS]) with presentations from Alastair Hay (University of Leeds), Ben Rusek (Committee on International Security and Arms Control, NAS) and Ralf Trapp (independent consultant). Further information about the Budapest Forum can be found at <<http://www7.nationalacademies.org/biosecurity/>>.

By coincidence, the Royal Society in the UK published a paper on Thursday summarising activities on reducing the risk of the misuse of scientific research in the life sciences which is available from <<http://royalsociety.org/page.asp?tip=1&id=7947>>.

Please note: there will be an additional MX report covering the final day of the Meeting. This will be published early next week and will be posted at the web locations given below.

This is the fifth 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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