

Monday 12th August 2013

## The 2013 Meeting of Experts: setting the scene

The 2013 Meeting of Experts (MX) is the second in a series of four years of meetings in the third inter-sessional process for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC). The MX will be followed by a one-week Meeting of States Parties (MSP) in December. The third inter-sessional process was agreed at the Seventh BWC Review Conference that was held in December 2011. The inter-sessional meetings are intended to be practical and focused on promoting ideas and learning from experiences in order to develop common understandings and effective actions. The 2013 meetings will be chaired by Judit Körömi of Hungary, with two Vice-Chairs – Ambassador Mazlan Muhammad of Malaysia and Ambassador Urs Schmid of Switzerland.

### **Topics under discussion during the 2013 meetings**

The three on-going topics, also known as the standing agenda items, of the third inter-sessional process are ‘Cooperation and assistance, with a particular focus on strengthening cooperation and assistance under Article X’, ‘Review of developments in the field of science and technology related to the Convention’, and ‘Strengthening national implementation’. In 2013 the meetings will also discuss ‘How to enable fuller participation in the CBMs’, a topic that was under discussion in 2012 as well.

Article X covers the issue of access to the life sciences for peaceful purposes of the Convention and is seen as part of a bargain in which the renunciation of biological weapons and the control of the hostile uses of the life sciences have to be implemented in such a way as not to hinder the use of the life sciences for peaceful purposes. There remains a divergence of perspectives between States Parties relating to Article X. Cooperation and assistance goes further than Article X and includes other aspects such as capacity building.

The changing science and technology (S&T) context, and in particular the rapid advances in the life sciences, leads to changes in the nature of risks and threats the regime may need to counter, as well as providing new opportunities for peaceful uses. Many developments in the life sciences do not easily fall into clear categories of biology or chemistry. This blurring of the traditional disciplines is often referred to as ‘convergence’. With distinct conventions on biological and chemical weapons, there is a concern that a gap in coverage might appear if both regimes were not aware of convergence issues. The Final Report of the Third Review Conference for the Chemical Weapons Convention, held in The Hague in April, noted ‘the increasing convergence of chemistry and biology, and welcomed the establishment of the SAB [Scientific Advisory Board] temporary working group on the convergence of chemistry and biology to explore and consider the potential implications of these advances to the Convention’ [para 9.142] and encouraged ‘States Parties and the Secretariat to continue to keep the convergence of chemistry and biology under review, including through the SAB temporary working group on the convergence of chemistry and biology, and encouraged greater interaction between relevant experts’ [para 9.155(c)].

Improved national implementation of the provisions of the BWC in ways that are appropriate to national contexts has long been seen as an important way of enhancing effectiveness of the overall regime to control biological weapons.

The system of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) under the Convention provides for returns to be provided by States Parties on certain relevant activities and facilities. While numbers of returns have been rising, there has been wide recognition that participation in CBMs could be improved further.

Cutting across some of these topics are questions posed by Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand and Switzerland in a paper they put forward at the 2012 MSP entitled 'We need to talk about compliance' (WP.11 of that meeting). The key questions were: 'what constitutes compliance with the BWC?' and 'how can States Parties better demonstrate their compliance with the BWC and thereby enhance assurance for other States Parties?'

### **Global Context**

A significant change to the global context for the BWC has been that since the 2012 Meeting of States Parties, four countries have joined the Convention – Cameroon (18 January), Nauru (5 March), Guyana (26 March) and Malawi (2 April) – bringing the total number of States Parties to 170.

There are external political issues that may impinge on the BWC this year. One example is the unfulfilled proposal for a conference on the issue of a Middle East Zone Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction. A second is the situation in Syria and the investigation into alleged use of chemical weapons in that country under the United Nations Secretary-General's investigation mechanism. This mechanism has been discussed many times at BWC meetings as a possible method of investigating alleged use of biological weapons.

### **Preparations for the MX**

Two background papers by the BWC's Implementation Support Unit (ISU) and seven Working Papers by States Parties had been issued as formal MX documents by the end of the week before the meeting. A further seven working papers had been issued as 'advance versions' prior to being typeset as official documents. The advance release of papers allows for their contents to be considered before start of the MX. All these papers can be found via the BWC ISU website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>; official documents can also be found via the UN documents server <<http://documents.un.org>> (reference numbers for the official documents for this meeting all start BWC/MSP/2013/MX/). Additional papers are likely to be issued.

### **About these reports**

Starting from the Sixth Review Conference in 2006, the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) has produced daily reports from each of the BWC meetings. The reports were initially designed to help people who were not in Geneva to follow the proceedings but are now also widely circulated each morning amongst delegates. Six reports will be produced during this MX, starting with this setting the scene report. A report will be produced covering each day's activities, the last of which will be circulated electronically after the MX has concluded. If you would like to be added to the mailing list please contact the author via the details given at the bottom of this page. The BWPP daily reports from the 2006 and 2011 Review Conferences, as well as those from the annual meetings in between and after, are available via the BWPP website at <<http://www.bwpp.org>>.

*This is the first report from the Meeting of Experts for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 12 to 16 August 2013 in Geneva.*

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