

Friday 7th December 2018

Informal Thursday: reports from the Meetings of Experts

The 2018 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) resumed on Thursday, but in a different location (room XXIV, usually used for side events, rather than the plenary room in use for the last few days, room XVIII). The underlying reason for this was financial and the move had been flagged in advance. One consequence was that interpretation services were not available and so the plenary was described as being informal. It was noted earlier in the week that this move would put some delegates at a disadvantage and, at a policy level, went against other efforts within multilateral institutions to promote multilingualism. Some delegates cited this in corridor discussions as a clear reason why the financial situation needs to be resolved.

The day started with a further discussion of financial issues before moving on to reports from the Chairs of each of the five Meetings of Experts (MXs) that had been held in August. These discussions were intended to help bring together elements of what had been discussed in each MX as a contribution to the final report for the MSP. The more intimate nature of the room led to a much more interactive discussion.

Further consideration of financial matters

The MSP Chair, Ljupco Jivan Gjorgjinski (former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), introduced a new version of his 'elements paper', taking into account feedback from the plenary discussion on Wednesday. He reiterated some points made then by delegations, such as a need to ensure that those that pay in full should not end up subsidising those that don't. The Chair reminded delegates that when financial decisions have to be taken by the UN, it is useful for the UN offices to have clarity about how the BWC states parties want things to be carried out. He offered to work on a way to communicate this. [*Note: The peculiar nature of the BWC and its operations within the UN can seem confusing. The BWC as a legal arrangement is sovereign, is not legally part of the UN and can take its own decisions. The highest level decision making body is the five-yearly Review Conference. However, for practical reasons it uses UN premises for meetings and employs staff through the UN. For the provision of these services, the BWC states parties collectively reimburse the UN. The BWC text is very short and has no reference to finances within it, so UN financial rules are followed.*]

The updated elements paper was shorter than the earlier iteration with more tightly focused phrasing. Most interventions in the discussion related to liquidity issues and the question of how a 'working capital fund' would be established and how it would be replenished when the funds within it had to be used.

Monthly reports of the financial situation, including details of arrears, are posted to the BWC ISU website under the 'latest information' section. The most recent figures are as of 30 November.

Reports from the Meetings of Experts

The agenda item for most of the day was 'Consideration of the factual reports of the Meetings of Experts reflecting their deliberations, including possible outcomes'. The main

parts of the reports from the MXs are procedural. Each report has an annex which contains a summary of discussion that is produced by the relevant MX Chair under their own authority and thus has no official status. The status of each annex is less important than its purpose -- to provide a record of the issues under discussion without drawing conclusions about where the balance on any particular set of issues lies. Overall, they are similar to the synthesis papers that had been produced after the earlier MXs in earlier work programmes. In addition, each MX Chair was asked by the MSP Chair to provide a conference room paper on what might be a contribution to the final report of the MSP and these were circulated earlier this week. Some MX Chairs also produced shorter papers that were circulated in the meeting room on Thursday to help focus discussion.

There were some common themes, such as how to build on the discussions in each MX in each year – this had been a weakness of the previous inter-sessional work programme (2012-15) in which many topics were revisited year-on-year without much progress. A number of MX Chairs emphasised that there were only two more years of this work programme (as the current inter-sessional process had only three years of MXs and not four that had happened previously). A number of contributions to the discussions indicated a desire to be able to communicate a set of results from the inter-sessional meetings to the Ninth BWC Review Conference scheduled for 2021. In some cases there were certain items of a more operational character, that some delegations suggested might be able to be put into practice earlier. An example of this is outline procedures for a state party to request assistance under Article VII that were discussed in MX4.

There is one significant development that impacts upon this process to contribute to the final MSP report – in the past, the Chair of the MSP also chaired that year's MX. In this inter-sessional process, there is an MSP Chair and five MX Chairs. This has distinct advantages in spreading the workload but has implications for the process of bringing the details from the separate MXs into a coherent whole for the MSP report. There are overlaps and synergies between the different MX topics that it would be important not to lose. The process of discussing each MX report in turn meant some questions were raised about whether certain subjects should be reported in one MX or another. There are some areas of firm agreement such as for some subjects within MX4, while at the same time there are distinct (and deep) divergences of views in relation to topics covered in MX5.

The MXs, topics and Chairs were as follows: MX1, 'Cooperation and Assistance, with a Particular Focus on Strengthening Cooperation and Assistance under Article X', Ambassador Maria Teresa Almojuela (Philippines); MX2, 'Review of Developments in the Field of Science and Technology Related to the Convention', Pedro Luiz Dalcerro (Brazil); MX3, 'Strengthening National Implementation', Ambassador Julio Herráiz (Spain); MX4, 'Assistance, Response and Preparedness', Daniel Nord (Sweden); and MX5, 'Institutional Strengthening of the Convention', Otakar Gorgol (Czech Republic).

Side events

There were three side events on Thursday. One was convened at breakfast by the UK and Biosecure on 'Next Generation Biosecurity: Evolving biosecurity education and engaging scientists'. Two, at lunchtime, were convened by Germany on 'Strengthening the UNSGM: From Trusted Laboratories to Trained Experts', and by Russia on 'Centenary of Russia's Anti-plague Institute "Microbe": Lessons learned and opportunities for utilising mobile biomedical units. Presentation of UK-Russia working paper on Article VII.'

NOTE: There will be an additional MSP report covering the closing day. This will be published sometime next week and will be posted at the web locations given below.

This is the fourth report from the BWC Meeting of States Parties, being held from 4 to 7 December 2018 in Geneva. These reports have been produced for all official BWC meetings since the Sixth Review Conference in 2006 by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). They are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>> and <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>>. An email subscription link is available on each page. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie of CBW Events <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.