

Monday 29th July 2019

The 2019 Meetings of Experts: the second year of the new format

The 2019 series of Meetings of Experts (MXs) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) is the second year of the latest of the work programmes held between the five-yearly Review Conferences of the Convention. These work programmes are commonly known as the ‘inter-sessional process’ or ‘inter-sessional programme’. The current work programme was agreed at the Meeting of States Parties (MSP) held in December 2017. That MSP had been delegated by the Eighth BWC Review Conference in 2016 to decide on this. The 2017 MSP agreed to the holding of five distinct MXs over eight days in the middle of each of 2018, 2019 and 2020, together with a four-day MSP towards the end of each calendar year. The Chair of the 2019 MSP is Ambassador Yann Hwang (France) with Ambassador Adrian Vierita (Romania) and Ambassador Andreano Erwin (Indonesia) as Vice-Chairs.

In summary, the 2019 MXs, their dates, their topics, and their Chairs appointed through consultations following the 2018 MSP are:

- MX1 – 29-30 July (Monday-Tuesday) *Cooperation and Assistance, with a Particular Focus on Strengthening Cooperation and Assistance under Article X* – Ambassador Victor Dolidze (Georgia)
- MX2 – 31 July-2 August (Wednesday & Friday [Thursday is a public holiday]) *Review of Developments in the Field of Science and Technology Related to the Convention* – Yury Nikolaichik (Belarus)
- MX3 – 5 August (Monday) *Strengthening National Implementation* – Melanie Reddiar (South Africa)
- MX4 – 6-7 August (Tuesday-Wednesday) *Assistance, Response and Preparedness* – Usman Iqbal Jadoon (Pakistan)
- MX5 – 8 August (Thursday) *Institutional Strengthening of the Convention* – Laurent Masméjean (Switzerland)

The 2018 MXs were the first year of this new format. Experience showed that having Chairs for each topic spread the workload and enhanced the effectiveness of the meetings. While the five separate meetings had a benefit of focusing the substantive work, it also had limitations (as in earlier work programmes) in making connections between related topics dealt with in separate meetings. To take one example: there are many overlaps and synergies between the topics in MX1 and in MX4; enabling discussion of the beneficial connections has been a recognized challenge of the evolving MX formats.

As each MX is a stand-alone activity with a different occupant in the Chair, each meeting needs to have its own opening formalities, such as adoption of its agenda and decisions on participation, and its own adoption of a report. The official reports from each of the MXs in 2018 were essentially procedural as the MXs are intended to exchange ideas, innovations and perspectives rather than reach consensus positions. When the new format for the MXs was decided in 2017, many delegations anticipated that the outputs of the Meetings would be used as inputs for the annual MSP later in the year. Such delegations were disappointed last year when consensus on this matter could not be found and the 2018 MSP adopted a final report in which the key sentence of the section on the

work of the MXs read: ‘No consensus was reached on the deliberations including any possible outcomes of the Meetings of Experts.’

The topic under discussion during MX1

The overarching topic for MX1 is ‘Cooperation and assistance, with a particular focus on strengthening cooperation and assistance under Article X’. Article X of the BWC is about access to the life sciences for peaceful purposes, a key bargain within the Convention that the renunciation of biological weapons and the implementation of controls over hostile uses of the life sciences have to be balanced so that there is not hindrance to the use of the life sciences for peaceful purposes. Article X also provides that states parties ‘undertake to facilitate, and have the right to participate in, the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information for the use of bacteriological (biological) agents and toxins for peaceful purposes’. Cooperation and assistance goes further than Article X, including other aspects such as capacity building, and MX1 will be discussing a number of agreed sub-topics.

MX documentation and printed information

The MX agendas, which list the agreed sub-topics for each meeting, and a number of working papers have already been issued as formal MX documents. Additional papers are likely to be issued. These papers, together with statements and presentations made within the MXs, can be found via the BWC’s official website run by the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) – the latest meetings are linked from <<https://www.unog.ch/bwc/meeting>>; official documents can also be obtained via the UN documents server at <<http://documents.un.org>>. Official documents for MX1 start BWC/MSP/2019/MX.1/, for MX2, BWC/MSP/2019/MX.2/, and so forth.

Financial situation

The financial situation for the BWC remains difficult with non-payment of agreed assessments by a number of states parties causing a cash flow problem. While some of these arrears eventually appear as late payments, the ongoing deficits have put BWC activities at risk – including meetings [the 2018 MSP was shortened by a day for its formal proceedings and that day was taken informally with no interpretation, putting a number of delegates at a disadvantage] and the support for the ISU [the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons lost its ISU owing to financial reasons]. The 2018 MSP decided to establish a Working Capital Fund ‘solely as a source of short-term financing pending receipt of reasonably anticipated assessed contributions’ which has received some voluntary donations and more are expected in the future.

BWC membership

Membership of the BWC is currently 182, the most recent ratification being that of the Central African Republic on 25 September 2018. There remain five signatory states [i.e., signed the Convention before it entered into force but have yet to ratify it] and ten states which have neither signed nor ratified the Convention. While there has not been any ratifications or accessions thus far in 2019, there are signs of progress. For example, South Sudan announced in June that it was close to ratification, following a Cabinet decision in support of this.

Universal membership of the Convention is a long-established aspiration and a number of activities take place on a regular basis, such as regional workshops, to assist and encourage countries that are not yet members to join.

This is the first report from the series of five Meetings of Experts for the BWC which are being held from 29 July to 8 August 2019 in Geneva. These reports have been produced for all BWC meetings since the Sixth Review Conference in 2006 by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP). They are posted to <<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, CBW Events, who can be contacted via <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.