

Wednesday 8th September 2021

MX4 on assistance, response and preparedness: summary of proceedings

The fourth of the 2020 Meetings of Experts (MXs) to the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) was held in Geneva on Monday and Tuesday on the topic of ‘Assistance, Response and Preparedness’. This meeting was chaired by Elena Kuzmanovska Biondic (North Macedonia). Report 4 of this series provides some background to this MX. MX4 materials, including documents, presentations and statements as well as the links to the UN Web TV recordings of the sessions together with an experimental set of automated transcripts are posted by the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) to <https://meetings.unoda.org/section/bwc-mx-2020-mx4/>.

In addition to the pandemic restrictions reducing numbers in the room, the second week of MXs have been running in parallel with meetings of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) and the Conference on Disarmament (the latter of which is still trying to conclude its report of the current session).

During the afternoon of the first day a short collective statement by some non-governmental organizations was given on MX4 issues, this time in Chinese.

MX 4 was completed in just under a day and a half.

Thematic discussion

As the formal reports of each MX lists the speakers under each agenda item, these will not be listed here. The themes chosen for reporting here are based on the agenda items of the meeting, but may include points relevant to a theme raised under another agenda item.

The Chair and many delegations noted that Article VII had never been invoked and there were many expressions of hope that it never will. There were a number of points during the discussion in which lessons were drawn from COVID-19 impacts, especially where earlier preparedness had enhanced response to the current pandemic.

Practical challenges – As Article VII refers to a decision by the UN Security Council, a key question would be: how long would it take the Council to reach a decision? Additionally, would a decision by the UNSC, probably in the form of a resolution, provide some parameters relating to assistance? A number of interventions reminded MX4 of the Eighth BWC Review Conference (2016) final document that ‘encourages States Parties in a position to do so to provide timely emergency assistance, if requested pending consideration of a decision by the Security Council.’ Synergies between Articles VII and X were highlighted but some fears were expressed that duplication between the two articles could consume resources. Some interventions during this and later agenda items wanted to make a distinction between Article VII and Article X capacity building; others intimated that the priority was the building of relevant capacities rather than under which article any assistance was carried out.

Guidelines for requesting assistance – Many delegations expressed appreciation for the efforts by South Africa on these issues, and in particular two recent working papers [WP.3 & WP.4, MX4 2018], with a number of delegations suggesting proposals should be presented for adoption at the Ninth Review Conference. It was put forward that any request to the Security Council should be copied to BWC states parties

but it did not seem clear whether this would be a suggestion for the depositaries to do so or the ISU.

Procedures for improving assistance and coordination – The major element of this agenda item was the proposal for an Article VII database. India and France spoke to their joint paper [WP.3 & Corr.1] which contains the latest iteration of this proposal. As in earlier MX4s, there was broad support for this proposal and a number of calls for a clear decision by the Ninth Review Conference to establish the database. Some concerns were raised about minimizing overlap with the Article X database with suggestions raised that the two databases might have some interaction to avoid unnecessary duplication. Interventions that mentioned a possible voluntary trust fund to support Article VII generally expressed support for the idea although questions were raised about who would decide how money was spent from such a fund. There was a technical presentation from the World Health Organization on biorisks and health security which highlighted that robust public health measures are crucial to limit the impacts of all forms of infectious disease, whether deliberate or natural.

Mobile biomedical units – Russia introduced the latest version of its proposal in this area [WP.2] which is focused on the benefits that mobile units bring to enhancing responses to disease outbreaks and this update includes information on the use of the units as part of responses to the current pandemic. The need for increased operational capacities during public health emergencies caused by infectious diseases is widely recognised and this would include situations where there is a possibility of use of biological weapons. The divergences of views in this area are mostly focused around the question of whether such units should be national assets or collective assets. For example, during discussion it was suggested that financing such units through the BWC would be challenging. Discussion also included questions of the different roles such units might play under Article VI (investigation) and Article VII (assistance).

Strengthening international response capabilities – Japan introduced WP.1 which describes a project it is supporting through voluntary funding to strengthen national, sub-regional and international capacities to respond to potential biological weapons use. Germany spoke to its paper [WP.5] on a recent table top exercise and plans for a future field exercise in support of the UN Secretary-General's mechanism to investigate alleged use of biological weapons. There were technical presentations from Sri Lanka (on strengthening national health security and assistance received to do so) and Germany (presented remotely from Mali on cooperation between the two countries). In discussion, Switzerland noted a forthcoming seminar it is convening on the Secretary-General's mechanism. Panama spoke about the Regional Logistics Centre for Humanitarian Assistance established in that country as a hub to support COVID-19 response in the region. Within the discussion some comparisons were drawn between the mobile laboratory concept used by Germany in Mali – which is based on equipment that can be carried in a series of crates not much bigger than suitcases and so easily transportable by a variety of means – and the Russian mobile laboratory concept – based around equipment fitted in motor vehicles making the equipment more resilient. As presented, each concept can have advantages and disadvantages in different contexts.

Agriculture – The USA introduced WP.4 which is based on a case study of how an anomalous set of events (i.e., arrivals in that country of unsolicited packets of seeds from overseas) provided lessons that can be applied to responding to future events. A number of interventions noted that biological threats to plants and animals had received considerably less attention in BWC meetings than threats to humans. Japan noted that foot and mouth disease and avian influenza illustrated the need for preparation for response to potential hostile biological threats to agriculture.

This is the ninth in a series of reports for the Meetings of Experts for the BWC which are scheduled to be held from 30 August to 8 September 2021 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 is solely responsible for their content. He can be contacted via <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.