

Tuesday 4th December 2018

The 2018 Meeting of States Parties: setting the scene

The 2018 Meeting of States Parties (MSP) for the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) is the first in the current inter-sessional process to follow a series of Meetings of Experts (MXs). The Eighth five-yearly BWC Review Conference, held in 2016, had been unable to agree on a new work programme to be carried out in the years running up to the Ninth Review Conference, scheduled for 2021. As such work programmes run between sessions of the Review Conference they are known as the inter-sessional process or, sometimes, the inter-sessional work programme. The Eighth Review Conference delegated the 2017 MSP to take the decision on the inter-sessional process.

Financial pressures (see below) have meant that the MSP this year will be only 3 days in duration, holding formal meetings on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday of this week. Thursday will be used for informal consultations and will not be a formal day of the MSP. The Chair of the 2018 MSP is Ljupco Jivan Gjorgjinski (former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).

The 2018 Meetings of Experts

A major agenda item for the MSP is: ‘Consideration of the factual reports of the Meetings of Experts reflecting their deliberations, including possible outcomes’. The 2018 MXs, as decided at the 2017 MSP, held a year ago, were a continuation of the work programmes that were first established in 2002 but at the same time they represented a significant change in structure. The 2017 MSP agreed to the holding of five distinct MXs in each of 2018, 2019 and 2020. Each year would also include a week-long MSP towards the end of the calendar year. In summary, the MXs and their topics, as agreed by the 2017 MSP, and the Chairs appointed through subsequent consultations were:

- MX1 – (2 days) Cooperation and Assistance, with a Particular Focus on Strengthening Cooperation and Assistance under Article X – Ambassador Maria Teresa Almojuela (Philippines)
- MX2 – (2 days) MX2 - Review of Developments in the Field of Science and Technology Related to the Convention – Pedro Luiz Dalcero (Brazil)
- MX3 – (1 day) Strengthening National Implementation – Ambassador Julio Herráiz España (Spain)
- MX4 – (2 days) Assistance, Response and Preparedness – Daniel Nord (Sweden)
- MX5 – (1 day) Institutional Strengthening of the Convention – Otakar Gorgol (Czech Republic)

The five separate meetings had a benefit of focusing the substantive work, but had limitations in making connections between topics dealt with in separate meetings. Having Chairs who need only focus on one topic spread the workload and enhanced the effectiveness of meetings. The official reports from each of the MXs were essentially procedural as the purpose of the MXs are to exchange ideas, innovations and perspectives rather than reach consensus positions. Each report was accompanied by a Chair’s summary. At the time of writing, the BWC website has these in advance format.

BWC financial challenges

The financial uncertainties for the BWC create challenges that distract from the core purpose of the Convention – upholding the norm against acquisition or use of disease as a weapon. These financial uncertainties are caused by the late payment by governments of the assessed contributions that they had agreed to pay. New financial management arrangements within the UN system have meant that money cannot be committed until it has been received. Thus, late payments (or, even worse, no payment) make planning for meetings and agreement for staff contracts for the Implementation Support Unit (ISU), the small nucleus of staff to support the Convention, extremely difficult.

The financial situation is the direct cause of the MSP this week being of 3 days duration rather than the 4 that had been agreed at MSP 2017.

Monthly reports of received assessed contributions are posted to the BWC ISU website each month under the ‘latest information’ section. It would seem that, despite many prompts on the subject, many delegations (and governments) do not seem to have grasped the severity of the situation.

BWC membership

At the 2017 MSP, membership of the BWC stood at 179. On 9 January 2018 the State of Palestine deposited its instrument of accession to the BWC with the relevant authorities in Moscow and London, becoming the 180th member. On 14 June 2018 Niue deposited its instrument of accession to the BWC with the relevant authorities in Washington, DC, becoming the 181st member. On 25 September 2018, the Central African Republic deposited its instrument of ratification to the BWC with the relevant authorities in Washington, DC, becoming the 182nd member. During the year there were press reports that the United Republic of Tanzania made progress in its domestic requirements towards ratification. Universal membership of the Convention is a long-established aspiration and a number of activities have taken place since the 2017 MSP, such as regional workshops, to encourage and assist states that are not yet members to join.

MSP documentation

The agenda and an indicative schedule for the meeting have been published together with a number of working papers along with other materials such as the report on universalization activities. The annual report of the ISU is understood to be forthcoming. These can be found via the BWC ISU website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>; official documents can also be found via the UN server <<http://documents.un.org>> (identifiers for official documents for this meeting all start BWC/MSP/2018/).

Global context

BWC meetings are sometimes affected by the global context. The Fourth Review Conference for the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) reached its conclusion without being able to agree a final report the Friday before the BWC MSP convenes. [Daily reports from the CWC can be found at <<http://www.cbw-events.org.uk/cwc-rep.html>>.] While there are a number of overlaps between the policy areas of chemical weapons and biological weapons, a key aspect of the divergence of views within the CWC was the question of how to handle allegations of use of chemical weapons (in a number of cases, the assessments of many governments was that some of these should be considered confirmed use). However, there are no similar allegations within the scope of the BWC.

This is the first 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>.