

Monday 24th August 2009

The 2009 Meeting of Experts: setting the scene

The opening of the 2009 Meeting of Experts (MX) marks the third year of the second 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 topic for discussion at the MX and MSP this year is 'With a view to
enhancing international cooperation, assistance and exchange in biological sciences and
technology for peaceful purposes, promoting capacity building in the fields of disease
surveillance, detection, diagnosis, and containment of infectious diseases: (1) for States
Parties in need of assistance, identifying requirements and requests for capacity
enhancement; and (2) from States Parties in a position to do so, and international
organizations, opportunities for providing assistance related to these fields'. This topic was
agreed at the Sixth Review Conference for the BWC which was held at the end of 2006.
The MSP may also discuss 'universalisation and comprehensive implementation of the
Convention', as agreed at the Sixth Review Conference.

By the weekend before the opening of the MX, 4 background papers by the BWC
Implementation Support Unit (ISU) and 7 Working Papers by States Parties had been made
public in electronic form as 'Advance Versions' as submitted by the States Parties 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 of these papers can be found via the ISU
website <<http://www.unog.ch/bwc>>; official documents of the meeting can also be found
via the UN documents server <<http://www.documents.un.org>>.

The MX will include sessions for plenary statements, as well as more focused
working sessions and discussion panels. A poster session, which was an innovation at the
2007 MX, will also be held. As with earlier meetings, there will be a number of side events.
While the side events have traditionally been held by non-governmental organizations
(NGOs), there has been a rising trend for others to make use of these opportunities. At this
MX, two of the eight announced side events are being organized by the European Union.

Issues of disease surveillance and containment

It may seem paradoxical at first glance that issues of disease surveillance are being
considered at a meeting of an international treaty that is primarily concerned with arms
control and international security. This paradox can be explained with the understanding
that the use of biological weapons – whether in warfare or as a terrorist or criminal act – is
nothing more than the deliberate use of disease. With this understanding, it is apparent that
there is much common ground in responses to outbreaks of disease, whether they stem from
natural, deliberate or accidental (such as a laboratory incident) causes.

The 2009 Meetings are convened on a similar theme to that of the Meetings five
years previously which discussed the topic 'enhancing international capabilities for

responding to, investigating and mitigating the effects of cases of alleged use of biological or toxin weapons or suspicious outbreaks of disease'. Just as the 2009 MX is starting at a time when there are fears of the global impact of the novel influenza A (H1N1) strain [commonly, although misleadingly, referred to as 'swine flu'] the 2004 Meetings had been convened, by coincidence, in the aftermath of the SARS outbreak of the year before. The nature of SARS as a typical infectious disease that showed no respect for national boundaries helped focus thinking at the time about how natural outbreaks have an impact far greater than simply the health of the individual, but have ramifications and implications for economic security and even national security.

Article X issues

While much of the technical discussion at the MX is likely to be uncontroversial of itself, the subject matter impinges on one of the areas of the Convention that has been the subject of differing interpretations and some disagreement. The BWC contains a bargain, embodied in Article X of the Convention, which is the renunciation by States Parties of hostile uses of biological materials and technologies in return for freedom to gain the benefits of the peaceful uses of them. Security, economic and geographical considerations influence how individual governments see the balance between the two sides of this bargain. Most Western states have consistently put emphasis on the security aspects of the bargain, while states seeking greater economic development see access to peaceful uses as a key justification for using precious governmental resources in their engagement with the Convention. The human cost of disease is widely recognised, but it is worth noting that there are many parts of the world in which the economic costs of infectious disease have a significant impact, not only through individuals being unable to be economically active when they are unwell, but also through the efforts of others to take care of them.

Over the years, there has been a growing recognition that non-security considerations have to be taken into account in order to encourage universal membership, national implementation and on-going active engagement with the BWC, and the adoption at the Sixth Review Conference of this year's topic for the BWC Meetings is an indication of this.

Recent BWPP publications

Two new BWPP publications have been released this year. The 'BWPP Biological Weapons Reader' provides a wide range of technical and contextual information on the BWC and relevant issues. The Reader is available on CD-ROM and was made possible with the support of the Swedish Foreign Ministry. 'Building a Global Ban: Why States Have Not Joined the BWC' has built upon the work of the BWPP during the first EU Joint Action in support of the BWC and identifies activities to encourage universalization of the Convention. This report is available in hard copy and was made possible with the support of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Both of these publications as well as the BWPP daily reports from earlier Meetings and the 2006 Review Conference 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 24 to 28 August 2009 in Geneva. The reports are designed to help people who are not in Geneva to follow the proceedings.

The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) in co-operation with the Verification Research, Training and Information Centre (VERTIC). Copies are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/reports.html>>.

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