

## Update on the Meeting of Experts for BWTC (18-22 August 2008)

**Dr Monalisa Joshi**

*The author is the Assistant Editor, CBW Magazine.*

As a part of the intersessional process for the BWC, this Meeting of Experts (known as MX) was in its second year. This year topics for discussion before the MX were- National, regional and international measures to improve biosafety and biosecurity, including laboratory safety and security of pathogens and toxins etc. This year's MX generated open discussions and helped to disseminate information in the public domain.

**T**he Meeting of Experts for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC/BWC) was held from August 18 to 22, 2008 in Geneva. As a part of the intersessional process for the BWC, this Meeting of Experts (known as MX) was in its second year.

This year topics for discussion before the MX were- National, regional and international measures to improve biosafety and biosecurity, including laboratory safety and security of pathogens and toxins' and 'Oversight, education, awareness raising, and adoption and/or development of codes of conduct with the aim of preventing misuse in the context of advances in bio-science and bio-technology research with the potential of use for purposes prohibited by the Convention'.<sup>1</sup>

This article presents an account of the various events and discussions taken up at MX. The information for this article is based on the reports prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) in co-operation with the Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy.<sup>2</sup>

On the opening day, August 18, 2008 States Parties to the BWC made 'introductory statements', which was followed by statements from the NGOs. France (on behalf of the EU and associated states), Cuba (on behalf of the NAM), Pakistan, South Africa, Japan, US and India were among several other countries that gave statements. According to reports, the control of the hostile uses of the life sciences was marked as a challenge before the BWC.<sup>3</sup>

On the second day, August 19, thematic discussion on the 'concepts of biosafety and biosecurity' was initiated. There were presentations from several Intergovernmental organisations: the World Health Organisation, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United Nations Environment Programme/ Global Environment Facility, and the European Commission (DG SANCO).<sup>4</sup>

Later in the day a panel of four experts from the private sector recorded statements. Amongst

the four one was Shrikumar Suryanarayan (Association of Biotechnology Led Enterprises of India [ABLE]).<sup>5</sup>

On the third day, August 20, discussion from the previous day on the ‘concepts of biosafety and biosecurity’ were carried on. Later, presentations were also made by the representatives of scientific bodies like the American Biological Safety Association, the Asia Pacific Biosafety Association and the European Biological Safety Association etc.<sup>6</sup> The new Joint Action supporting the WHO in biosafety and biosecurity activities was mentioned by France. Issues like capacity building to meet disaster management, legal mechanisms to control pathogens and infrastructure development for High Level Labs also found mention.<sup>7</sup> The Risk Management Panel provided useful insights on the subject. It noted that good communication of risks should be carried at all stages of risk management.<sup>8</sup>

On August 21, presentations were made by Canada, France and Cameroon on the subjects of biosafety and biosecurity. It was mentioned that biosecurity and biosafety processes are an on-going process and not permanent arrangements.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Japan pointed out that the model of preventing scientific people’s involvement in hostile use of pathogens can be drawn from the country’s experiences of dealing with the Aum Shinrikyo. The UN Security Council 1540 committee then addressed the meeting on education and awareness raising within the states.<sup>10</sup> The draft of the procedural section of the final report of the MX was also circulated.<sup>11</sup> The intention behind the final report was to make some recommendations that State Parties might consider in the future. These recommendations were not binding.<sup>12</sup>

On the concluding day, August 22, the morning started with the last presentations on the second topic of MX 2008 – ‘Oversight, education, awareness raising, and adoption and/or development of codes of conduct with the aim of preventing misuse in the context of advances in bio-science and bio-technology research with the potential of use for purposes prohibited by the Convention’.<sup>13</sup>

Presentations were also made by Australia, Argentina, India, Georgia, and Pakistan on the theme of ‘education and awareness’.<sup>14</sup> The Chairman of MX, Ambassador Georgi Avramchev (The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), gave an interim report on universalisation of the Convention. He mentioned the three new States Parties to BWC, Zambia, Madagascar and the United Arab Emirates. He indicated that Cameroon and Mozambique were well advanced in their preparations for becoming Parties to the BTWC. In addition, Myanmar, Nepal, Comoros and Côte d’Ivoire also had made some progress to join the BWC.<sup>15</sup>

This year’s MX generated open discussions and helped to disseminate information in the public domain. It also set the ground for the next year’s meeting that will discuss on the subject of ‘enhancing international cooperation, assistance and exchange in biological sciences and technology for peaceful purposes’ and ‘promoting capacity building in the fields of disease surveillance, detection, diagnosis, and containment of infectious diseases’.

## Endnotes:

- 1 Richard Guthrie, MX report #1, The 2008 Meeting of Experts: Biosecurity and Education, via <http://www.bwpp.org/>.
- 2 Copies these reports are available via <<http://www.bwpp.org/2008MX/MX2008Resources.html>> or <<http://www.acronym.org.uk>>.
- 3 Richard Guthrie, MX report #2, The 2008 Meeting of Experts: The Opening Day, via <http://www.bwpp.org/>.
- 4 Richard Guthrie, MX report #3, The 2008 Meeting of Experts: The Second Day, via <http://www.bwpp.org/>.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Richard Guthrie, MX report #4, The 2008 Meeting of Experts: The Third Day, via <http://www.bwpp.org/>.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Richard Guthrie, MX report #5, The 2008 Meeting of Experts: The Fourth Day, via <http://www.bwpp.org/>.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Richard Guthrie, MX report #6, The 2008 Meeting of Experts: The Final Day, via <http://www.bwpp.org/>.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.