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# Meeting of the States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction

22 July 2019

English only

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## 2019 Meeting

Geneva, 3-6 December 2019

### Meeting of Experts on Assistance, Response, and Preparedness

Geneva, 6-7 August 2019

Item 8 of the provisional agenda

**Exploration of approaches by which States Parties, individually or collectively, might contribute to the strengthening of international response capabilities for infectious disease outbreaks, whether natural or deliberate in origin**

## **“Strengthening National, Sub-Regional and International Capacities to Prepare for and Respond to the Deliberate Use of Biological Weapons”: Project update**

**Submitted by Japan**

### **I. Introduction**

1. In 2018, Japan provided a voluntary contribution of \$819,250.00 to the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) towards a project on “Improving the preparedness of the United Nations (UN) Secretariat and relevant international organizations to ensure a coordinated international response to potential biological or chemical weapons use”. The project comprises two sub-projects:

- Sub-project 1 focuses on “Strengthening national, sub-regional and international capacities to prepare for and respond to deliberate use of biological weapons” and is led by the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC); and
- Sub-project 2 seeks to “Improve the preparedness of the United Nations to investigate allegations of the use of chemical or biological and toxin weapons” and is led by the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Branch of UNODA.

2. This paper describes progress made thus far towards the implementation of sub-project 1. Activities were initiated in October 2018 and will run for eighteen months. Furthermore, this paper will also briefly highlight activities planned for the remainder of the project period until the end of March 2020.

### **II. Project aims and structure**

3. The Eighth BWC Review Conference noted that “there are differences among States Parties in terms of their level of development, national capabilities and resources, and that these differences may directly affect both national and international capacity to respond



effectively to an alleged use of a biological or toxin weapon.”<sup>1</sup> The Conference encouraged States Parties in a position to do so, to assist other States Parties, upon request, to build relevant capacity.

4. Taking note of the variance in capabilities, the sub-project aims to enhance the level of preparedness of States Parties in Asia for addressing deliberate bio-incidents. This is done through the conduct of four regional capacity-building workshops, with three events taking place in Member States of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and one in Central Asia. Furthermore, four one-day thematic awareness-raising seminars on Article VII related topics will be held in Geneva for delegates of Permanent Missions in Geneva and representatives of relevant international organizations. The outcomes of these seminars target will feed in to the discussions at the Meetings of Experts on Assistance, Response and Preparedness (MX4) in 2019 and 2020. Finally, the sub-project aims to inform about existing disease monitoring and surveillance mechanisms. Accordingly, this should contribute to identifying opportunities for enhanced information exchange at the international level as well as promoting these tools at the national level, thereby also contributing to the implementation of Article X of the Convention.

5. Overall, the activities also aim to strengthen cooperation between States Parties in Asia and relevant intergovernmental organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE). Additionally, the workshops also provide a platform for information exchange on activities carried out by relevant regional entities such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Union Chemical Biological Radiological and Nuclear Risk Mitigation Centres of Excellence Initiative (EU CBRN COE Initiative) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

6. By bringing together experts from the public health, security, law enforcement, civil protection and diplomatic communities, the sub-project will enhance cross-sectoral communication and coordination as well as provide specialised training about preparedness, response, and assistance in response to deliberate biological threats.

### III. Project implementation

7. Since the start of the project in October 2018, two thematic seminars and two capacity building workshops have already been carried out. While detailed information about these activities has been made available to States Parties on the BWC website<sup>2</sup>, a brief summary of these events is presented below.

#### Thematic seminars

8. The first thematic seminar took place on 20 November 2018 and focussed on the “[The importance of disease monitoring and alert mechanisms: lessons for the Biological Weapons Convention](#)”<sup>3</sup>. More than fifty participants attended the event at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) in Geneva, Switzerland. BWC States Parties have recognized the importance of disease surveillance in the context of the Convention and addressed the topic in previous meetings, such as the Meetings of Experts and the Meetings of States Parties in 2004, 2009, and 2010. They also recognized that ‘strengthening and broadening national and international surveillance, detection, diagnosis and combating of infectious disease may support the object and purpose of the Convention.’<sup>4</sup>

9. During the seminar, a wide range of experts shared insights on the topic of disease surveillance from national, regional, and international perspectives. Additionally, scientists

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<sup>1</sup> [Final Document of the Eighth BWC Review Conference \(BWC/CONF.VIII/4\)](#), paragraph 43.

<sup>2</sup> See

[https://www.unog.ch/80256EE600585943/\(httpPages\)/1B69CE1F0B030DA0C1257F39003E9590?OpenDocument](https://www.unog.ch/80256EE600585943/(httpPages)/1B69CE1F0B030DA0C1257F39003E9590?OpenDocument)

<sup>3</sup> [Report of seminar on “The Importance of Disease Surveillance and Alert Mechanisms: Lessons for the BWC”](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Report of the 2004 Meeting of States Parties \(BWC/MSP/2004/3\)](#), para 18b.

and NGO representatives provided participants with their views and contributed to the discussions. The following issues transpired from the discussions:

- A strong disease surveillance capacity not only helps to protect against natural disease outbreaks, but also against the deliberate use of biological weapons. Thus, an effective method of preparedness against deliberate use scenarios is the strengthening of public health surveillance systems. Any investment in preventive measures, including strengthening of national public health systems and an effective disease surveillance system, is far more economical than efforts to contain the spread of a disease outbreak and mitigate its consequences;
- It was also noted that some States Parties continue to experience challenges in establishing and maintaining effective disease surveillance systems at the national level. Accordingly, speakers at the seminar underlined the importance of international cooperation and assistance, including building capacity in the area of early detection, identification and response;
- While seminar participants acknowledged the difficulty of distinguishing between natural and deliberate outbreaks of infectious diseases, particularly during the early stages of an outbreak, effective and strong surveillance mechanisms including the availability of relevant background data can assist in distinguishing between the two;
- The seminar also highlighted that besides traditional surveillance systems, event-based mechanisms have evolved over recent years. In view of the ever increasing amount of data available in the public domain, these ‘syndromic’ surveillance systems have great potential and allow for much faster recognition of outbreaks than traditional systems. At the same time, it was noted that these mechanisms cannot replace traditional surveillance mechanisms, but rather complement them;
- Similarly, it was evident from the seminar proceedings that civil society and interested stakeholder groups have made valuable contributions in the area of disease surveillance and have augmented the efforts made by public health services. Accordingly, the use of informal or unofficial information sources can enhance the detection of diseases, irrespective of whether they are of natural or deliberate origin;
- Besides efforts at the national level, regional actors such as the European Union have also established their own comprehensive disease surveillance systems. Furthermore, intergovernmental organizations such as the WHO, the FAO, the OIE and the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) have put in place systems for surveillance, identification, reporting and response to disease outbreaks. Moreover, and recognizing the importance of the ‘One Health’ approach, joint initiatives and platforms have also been established to enhance information exchange and sharing regarding disease-related aspects among relevant organizations;
- In the course of the seminar it was noted that concerns regarding the deliberate use of disease traditionally focus on those affecting humans. However, deliberate use scenarios targeting the animal and agricultural sectors are also a matter of significant concern, not least because of their potentially great impact on the public health infrastructure as well as resultant social and economic losses; and
- An effective and strong surveillance mechanism including the availability of relevant background data can assist in distinguishing between the natural and deliberate outbreaks of infectious diseases, particularly during the early stages of an outbreak.

10. The second thematic seminar looked at the issue of “[Rapid International Response to Biological Incidents: Lessons for the BWC](#)”<sup>5</sup> and was held on 16 April 2019 at the GCSP in Geneva, Switzerland. More than eighty participants from Permanent Representations of BWC States Parties in Geneva, national experts, civil society representatives and staff of regional and international organizations attended the event. At the Eighth Review Conference, BWC States Parties noted that “the tragic Ebola outbreak (2014-2015) in West

<sup>5</sup> [Report of seminar on "Rapid International Response to Biological Incidents: Lessons for the BWC"](#)

Africa has underlined the importance of rapid detection and prompt, effective, and coordinated response in addressing outbreaks of infectious diseases, and recognizes that these considerations would be relevant as well in the event of alleged use of biological or toxin weapons, which may pose additional challenges”.<sup>6</sup> The invited speakers addressed national, regional and international rapid response mechanisms and capacities from different angles. Additionally, the event also represented an opportunity to discuss issues such as interoperability, standardization and training issues regarding rapid response teams as well as to share views on core elements and implications for an effective response under Article VII.

11. The following issues featured prominently in the discussions:

- Rapid response teams represent an integral element of bio-preparedness and response considerations of States as well as regional and international organizations. The capability to deploy assets quickly for providing assistance in response to a public or animal health or pest control event has become increasingly important for many national agencies, non-governmental organizations as well as international organizations. Several States have created national response capacities within both civilian and/or military formations, which help in case of natural disease outbreaks, but which can also provide assistance in response to deliberate use scenarios;
- Discussions at the seminar clearly highlighted the benefits of establishing rapid response teams for both domestic and international response missions. Furthermore, experience from past international deployments clearly demonstrated the added value of such capabilities for supporting and augmenting national capabilities that might be limited or overwhelmed with the magnitude of the disaster;
- The rapid deployment of such capacities is based on a request for assistance by the affected State. The type of support provided may differ in each scenario and could include e.g. (risk) assessment related activities, the provision of emergency supplies of medicines and vaccines, taking of bio-samples including analysis, investigative activities, diagnosis, medical treatment and support, or providing support to the overall coordination of emergency response process;
- The seminar also highlighted that establishing and maintaining rapid response capacities requires sustained funding. Past international emergency response operations have shown that such investments into strengthening national rapid response capacities - before a crisis occurs - are well justified. In this respect, some speakers emphasized the linkage between Article VII and Article X of the Convention and highlighted the importance of international assistance and cooperation for capacity-building purposes; and
- Seminar discussions also addressed the aspect of operationalizing Article VII. Overall, speakers positively acknowledged the increasing degree of convergence and cross-regional support among States Parties for current Article VII related initiatives. At the same time, however, participants also noted that decisions are often inter-related and therefore discussions on other topics also need to be taken into account.

### **Regional capacity building workshops**

12. From 6 to 7 June 2019, The government of Thailand organised in close collaboration with the BWC ISU the “[First Regional Workshop for ASEAN States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention on Preparedness to Respond to the Deliberate Use of Biological Weapons](#)”. The event took place in Bangkok, Thailand. The Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security contributed to the workshop by bringing in its scientific expertise and facilitating a number of the sessions. More than fifty experts from nine ASEAN Member States (Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam) as well as representatives from regional and international

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<sup>6</sup> [Final Document of the Eighth BWC Review Conference \(BWC/CONF.VIII/4\), Part II \(Final Declaration\) Section G, paragraph 34.](#)

organizations (ASEAN Secretariat, EU CBRN CoE Regional Secretariat for South East Asia, FAO, OIE and WHO) attended the workshop.

13. In the course of the workshop, participants addressed, *inter alia*, the threat posed by biological weapons in Southeast Asia, national preparedness aspects as well as regional and international cooperation opportunities to enhance existing capacities. In this respect, representatives from regional and international organizations shared information regarding their organisations' mandates and activities in the context of preparedness for deliberate bio incidents. Additionally, issues such as national and regional disease outbreak surveillance mechanisms, education and awareness-raising, cross-sectoral cooperation and regional and international collaboration were addressed in active learning session. The Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security also provided an overview of its Clade X pandemic tabletop exercise and led a discussion with the participants to identify potential topics for inclusion in a tabletop exercise to be conducted at the fourth and final workshop in 2020.

14. In the course of the workshop, participants highlighted, *inter alia*, the following issues:

- The increasing frequency of emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases in the region as well as the potential threat of biological weapons emanating primarily from non-state actors; not least due to the various natural disease outbreaks that have affected the region, ASEAN Member States have made great strides in enhancing national preparedness for such scenarios;
- The importance of further strengthening existing preparedness mechanisms and capacities, including disease monitoring and surveillance systems; similarly, the preparation of national strategies, policies and action plans as well as the conduct of simulation exercises, training courses and effective information sharing mechanisms were recognized as key pillars of an effective national preparedness mechanism;
- The need for close cooperation between the health and the security/law enforcement sectors in order to prepare for and mitigate the potential consequences of a deliberate use scenario; and
- As a result of the active learning session, participants identified four overarching areas that require further strengthening, namely risk communication and assessment, information sharing (particularly at the cross-border level), the ability to shift response efforts from a natural to a deliberate scenario including identification or related triggers, and effective regulation and oversight in the field of science and technology.

15. From 26 to 27 June 2019, the government of Kyrgyzstan, the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek and the BWC ISU co-organized a regional workshop for Central Asian States Parties on "[Strengthening National, Sub-Regional and International Capacities to Prepare for and Respond to Deliberate Use of Biological Weapons](#)". The event took place at the Issyk Kul lake in Kyrgyzstan. The workshop brought together forty-five experts from six States Parties (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russian Federation and Uzbekistan) as well as representatives from five regional and international organizations (EU CBRN CoE Regional Secretariat for Central Asia, OSCE Secretariat, OSCE Programme Office Bishkek, FAO, OIE and WHO). Workshop proceedings entailed different didactical means such as presentations by national experts and regional/international organizations, an active learning session carried out in smaller breakout groups, an equipment demo of a mobile laboratory donated by the Russian Federation to Kyrgyzstan and a half day table top exercise.

16. In the course of the discussions, the following issues were, *inter alia*, noted:

- Central Asian States Parties have very similar structures and mechanisms in place to address natural disease outbreaks and deliberate bio-events. In this respect, participants informed about ongoing efforts and progress to further strengthen preparedness for both scenarios. At the same time, they also identified a number of gaps with respect to infrastructure aspects such as the need for enhanced diagnostic and analytical laboratory capacities. Furthermore, participants highlighted the need for operational training for specialists (including the conduct of case studies), the further development of policies, procedures and regulatory frameworks, the conduct

of risk communication workshops, and the adoption of national programmes to ensure cross sectoral collaboration.

- Participants also acknowledged the benefit of international cooperation and assistance opportunities at the bilateral, regional and international level and welcomed further efforts. Some experts also noted the value of deepened cooperation among States Parties in the region.
- WHO representatives indicated their readiness to carry out a follow up activity in the region if so requested by countries. With technical support under the WHO Health Emergencies Programme, the activity could address some of the identified training gaps pertaining to public health aspects of possible natural, accidental and deliberate events under the International Health Regulations.
- In the course of the event, the Russian Federation presented its proposed concept of biomedical units. A number of participants acknowledged the usefulness of establishing rapid response capacities and also expressed their principle support for the proposal.

#### **IV. The way ahead**

17. Four more activities are planned to be carried out by the end of the first quarter in 2020. Two additional one-day seminars will be held in Geneva later in autumn 2019 and early 2020. They will address assistance, response and preparedness related topics of the current 2018-2020 intersessional programme. Additionally, two more capacity-building workshops will take place in the ASEAN region. The governments of Malaysia and the Philippines have expressed their readiness to host those workshops, which are currently planned for early October 2019 and the first quarter of 2020, respectively.

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