

Second Meeting
Geneva, 6-10 December 2004

Meeting of Experts
Geneva, 19-30 July 2004
Items 5 and 6 of the agenda

**Questions related to the strengthening of the capacity to investigate and mitigate
alleged use of biological weapons**

Submitted by Norway

1. The capacity to investigate and mitigate alleged use of biological weapons goes in pair with the capacity to investigate suspicious natural outbreaks of disease. In our view, the most useful approach to strengthening BTW-control relies on the upgrading of civilian resources, in particular primary health care and epidemic outbreak surveillance. Such strengthening will make the threshold higher for considering an outbreak as suspicious. As a biological attack will be an exceptional event, compared to the large number of natural outbreaks of disease, our response capacity is fully dependent on civilian bodies with diagnostic and medical competence.
2. In Norway, preparedness against BTW-related outbreak of infectious disease has been strengthened through a number of measures that fall into three categories:
 - (i) Firstly, more resources have been invested in the health infrastructure. Bio-preparedness has been enhanced with regard to national laboratory and clinical capacity for diagnosing exotic or tropical diseases that do not occur naturally in our region of the world;
 - (ii) Secondly, emergency plans have been upgraded. Epidemic outbreak preparedness plans at the national as well as the municipal level have been updated, and table top exercises have been organised;
 - (iii) Thirdly, the Norwegian notification system on infectious diseases has been rendered more comprehensive. Relevant information is now transmitted more promptly to the responsible authority, which is the Norwegian Institute of Public Health.

3. Concerning surveillance capacity, any cooperation on primary notification and call for international assistance and response must be based on national mechanisms. Capacity must be developed within existing national structures. Inter-governmental organisations that contribute to preparedness point to the primary role of the national level for emergency response procedures.
 4. Norway believes cooperation between states and with inter-governmental organisations as a starting point should address national preparedness, both technical (diagnostic and medical) and organisational (disaster management). Effective cooperation in the field of BTW-control must be built on a common minimum level of professional ability and understanding.
 5. In this connection, Norway is happy to work together with Hungary on a project that aims at strengthening response capacity through training and education. The project description will be published as a working paper during this Meeting of Experts.
 6. Current structures for BTW alertness cooperation need to be looked at critically. As informal discussions in the Ad Hoc group established, some shortcomings and bottlenecks can be solved without increase of cost. For instance, a virtual network for cooperation between laboratories already exists, but suffers under problems related to the international transport of sample materials. This constitutes a veritable, but unnecessary, obstacle against efficient cooperation, and should be addressed as a priority topic by the Meeting of Experts.
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