

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

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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 Capacities in Responding to and Preparing for the Deliberate Use of Biological Weapons: Lessons Learned from UNSGM Table Top Exercise 2020 and Outlook to the Capstone Field Exercise

Submitted by Germany

I. Introduction

1. In the event of an alleged biological attack, it is vital to discern whether the incident or outbreak is natural or indeed intentional. Perpetrators would need to be held accountable to deter future actors and uphold the strong norm against the use of biological weapons. In the absence of a specific established entity, such as the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the Secretary-General's Mechanism for the Investigation of Alleged Use of Chemical, Biological or Toxin Weapons (UNSGM) remains the only framework to objectively investigate and ascertain such alleged violations of the Geneva Protocol and the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). The UN Secretary-General, Member States and the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) therefore need to build up a roster of qualified, globally diverse and trained experts, designate a specific, trusted laboratory network and devise clear protocols for a fact-finding mission. Germany continues to support the mechanism through, inter alia, projects of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) funded by the German Federal Foreign Office. As part of the project 'Strengthening the UNSGM', the RKI organizes a full scale exercise or Capstone Exercise whose first part took place in 2020 in the form of a virtual Table Top Exercise (TTX). As the first virtual exercise in the context of the UNSGM, the event did not only serve the planning of an UNSGM investigation mission, but also offered some lessons learned including the execution of virtual trainings for the UNSGM.

II. The UNSGM

2. Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 42/37 (c), the United Nations Secretary-General (SG) is, through the UNSGM, authorized to carry out prompt investigations in



response to allegations concerning the possible use of chemical, biological or toxin weapons. As such, the UNSGM provides a framework for an objective and scientific investigation of alleged violations of the 1925 Geneva Protocol or of other relevant rules of customary international law. On request from any Member State, the SG is authorized to launch an investigation, dispatch a fact-finding team, and report to all United Nation Member States. The UNSGM is not a standing investigative body. Instead, Member States nominate expert consultants, qualified experts and analytical laboratories which are then listed in a roster and may be called upon to support a UNSGM investigation and in accordance with the Guidelines and Procedures endorsed by the General Assembly in resolution A/45/57C (1990)¹.

III. The Capstone Exercise

3. As the central federal institution in Germany responsible for disease control and prevention, the RKI is the central federal reference institution for both applied and response-oriented research as well as for the public health sector. The institute has been active with UNSGM-related projects since 2014 and has lately focused mostly on the development of trainings for qualified experts (RKI's Centre of International Health Protection) and designated laboratories (RKI's Centre for Biological Threats and Special Pathogens). In 2019, the RKI for instance organized a Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT) for 20 experts of the UNSGM roster. In addition, the RKI currently prepares an e-learning module on the subject of personal protective equipment.

4. As a cornerstone of the current project, the RKI organizes a so-called Capstone Exercise that aims at simulating an investigation mission under the UNSGM, taking place in the form of a table top exercise to establish the pre-mission planning and a field exercise that simulates the mission phase. The Capstone Exercise was developed to test existent capacities and skills of qualified experts nominated to the UNSGM roster that have been taught in several trainings over the last few years, thereby identifying the focus and necessity of further trainings. The exercise includes all relevant stakeholders that would be needed for the activation and deployment of a UNSGM mission and aims at simulating a UNSGM investigation as realistic as possible. This comprises the activation of the mechanism by the SG (after receiving report(s) of allegations by a UN Member State and consulting as needed with qualified expert consultants), the preparation and deployment of the mission in the affected country, and finally reporting on the results of the investigation. Besides coping with the fictitious scenario, one key element is the coordination between the mission team and other relevant stakeholders, such as UNODA and UN Internal Task Force, nominated expert consultants, and the designated laboratories involved in the mission.

5. The RKI is the responsible institution for the planning, preparation, and realization of the Capstone Exercise. For both parts of the exercise: the pre-mission planning and the field exercise, the RKI collaborates with UNODA in their role as custodian of the UNSGM, as well as with the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) as the partner for the evaluation of the exercise.

IV. The Table Top Exercise 2020 (TTX)

6. Originally designed as a face-to-face event, the TTX 2020 had to be converted into a virtual format due to the COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions and was postponed to 9-13 November 2020. With the use of the training platform Remote Exercise Management System (REMS) and the video conference tool WebEx Meeting, the organizers moved all activities in the virtual space. With over 50 participants, the TTX benefited from a high level

¹ Expert consultants, as defined by the UNSGM guidelines and procedures, are high level specialists in their work field that support the SG with evaluating allegations made by UN Member states concerning the use of chemical or biological weapons and with executing a possible investigation. Qualified experts on the other hand, are – if selected by the SG – part of the investigating team that is sent on mission. Their task is to collect information on site and to report back to the SG.

of attendance and was well received. As the first virtual TTX to be executed in the UNSGM context, the exercise was followed by various interested stakeholders.

7. For the exercise, a team of four qualified experts was provided with a fictitious scenario and given the task to prepare a mission plan on the basis of existing UNSGM Guidelines and Procedures in the course of the exercise. The tasks focused on four essential elements of a mission plan: Command and control, sample collection, interviews, as well as resource requirements and logistics. Each day, the mission team received a new task they had to work on until the next meeting. As a work space, they could use a private video meeting room (Cisco WebEx) as well as the virtual platform REMS. In addition, the team had the opportunity to consult UNSGM expert consultants, representatives from designated laboratories and staff from UNODA at any time. The results were presented and discussed during daily meetings with representatives from different United Nations' entities, selected designated laboratories and other experienced experts nominated to the UNSGM roster as expert consultants. The exercise was also open for attendance to invited observers from various countries and international organizations.

V. Preliminary Results of the TTX

8. A comprehensive evaluation for the Capstone Exercise will provide the basis for the discussion of results from the TTX and the field exercise that is to be published in a joint report. The evaluation was developed and is executed in cooperation with FOI. Building on the collected evaluation data during the TTX, the oral and written feedback of participants in the follow-up of the TTX, as well as the observations of the organizing team, some preliminary outcomes can be highlighted already at this point in time. It has to be noted, however, that the following comments do not represent a structured evaluation, but rather a selective take on the TTX and its results that is meant to serve as a basis for discussion within the international community.

(a) The mission team, consisting of four qualified experts from the UNSGM roster, demonstrated an impressive expertise and cooperation to resolve their tasks. In a remarkable amount of time they developed an extensive and comprehensive mission plan at a very high-quality level, even though the work over several time zones was challenging (sometimes during night hours) and internet connection was not always stable.

(b) Throughout the exercise, the possibility of exchange between qualified experts and expert consultants during the exercise was highly appreciated and considered important for the planning of the mission within the Capstone exercise. In addition, the facilitation of collaboration and exchange between qualified experts and designated labs, in accordance with the UNSGM Guidelines and Procedures, was identified as beneficial for the success of the planning and the following mission, acknowledging the need for a sound and impartial investigation process. In a similar way, the cooperation with departments in the UN Secretariat and other UN entities was considered of high importance, with a possible need identified to specify UN support in the mission planning phase.

(c) In general, the team itself considered it very helpful to know each other's expertise and personalities for the task of planning a fictitious mission, which stresses the positive effect of regular personal encounters for the creation of team cohesion, and hence, supports the importance of regular training for nominated UNSGM experts and the facilitation of information exchange and networking among UNSGM experts. In addition, the team of qualified experts recommended further training for the following topics: Use of personal protective equipment and decontamination, International Air Transport Association (IATA) regulations, and special knowledge on bioagents that pose a severe threat to public health and safety.

(d) Finally, as an outcome of the various discussions during the TTX, the participants agreed that it is crucial for the team to adapt their planning to reality, that mission plans need to remain flexible and that regular review of mission plans is recommended, as pointed out in previous trainings.

VI. Lessons Learned for UNSGM virtual training

9. The TTX 2020 was the first virtual training exercise executed in the context of the UNSGM. The virtual format offered a range of advantages, such as the reduced costs, a low threshold for participation and the simplified coordination of participants. However, it should also be considered that an important aspect of exercises remains the personal exchange which is reduced to a minimum without a face-to-face encounter and that some training topics will be best covered by in-person instruction. In addition, there is the need for stable internet connection as well as appropriate technical equipment that is required to conduct virtual events. Finally, working across several time zones proved to be a challenging endeavour for the exercise.

10. Although the decision to move the exercise to a virtual space was a consequence of the COVID-19 related travel restrictions, the successful implementation of the TTX similar has been the starting point for considerations regarding similar projects for the future. As such, the RKI currently prepares a whole table top exercise series that will allow new experts on the UNSGM roster to get an introduction into UNSGM mission planning. Hence, while virtual formats will and cannot replace certain aspects of training, they should be regarded as a potential future complement to face-to-face UNSGM training.

VII Outlook

11. Following the TTX, the mission team reviewed their plans on the basis of the discussion and feedback during the exercise. The revised plans will be used for the subsequent field exercise. During the 10-day field exercise, the UN experts will have to conduct an investigation mission on a training ground in Berlin, take samples, interview witnesses, conduct negotiations with representatives of the fictitious state and face the possible physical and psychological challenges of the operation. The activities will take place in person, aiming to create conditions that are as realistic as possible.

12. As a further contribution to the UNSGM, and as a preparation for experts participating in the Capstone Exercise, the RKI is currently finalizing an e-learning module that aims to offer an overview on the subject of personal protective equipment. Two additional e-learning modules on the topic are planned. All modules will be hosted by UNODA as a future resource to experts on the UNSGM roster.

13. As COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions are expected to remain throughout 2021, the organizing team has decided to postpone the second part of the Capstone Exercise – the field exercise. As events with international visitors need sufficient lead time, and in order to allow flexibility, a new date for the field exercise will be decided on and announced in due time.
