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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

28 October 2020

English only

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## 2020 Meeting

Geneva, 12-15 April 2021

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

Geneva, 8-9 December 2020

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 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 has two components:

- Sub-project 1 which 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 which 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 provides an update on activities under sub-project 1 since the initial report was presented to the 2019 Meeting of Experts on Assistance, Response, and Preparedness (6-7 August 2019)<sup>1</sup>. It covers activities from 1 July 2019 to 12 October 2020 and describes progress made towards the implementation of the project. Furthermore, this paper also briefly highlights the activities planned for the remainder of the project period.

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<sup>1</sup> [BWC/MSP/2019/MX.4/WP.4](#) - Strengthening National, Sub-Regional and International Capacities to Prepare for and Respond to the Deliberate Use of Biological Weapons: Project update – Submitted by Japan



## II. Project aims and structure

3. Taking note of the variance in States Parties' capabilities, the project aims to enhance the level of preparedness of States Parties in Asia for addressing deliberate biological events. This is being done through the conduct of four regional capacity-building workshops, with three events 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 have been or will be organized in Geneva for delegates of Permanent Missions and representatives of relevant international organisations. The outcomes of these seminars feed into the discussions at the Meetings of Experts on Assistance, Response and Preparedness (MX4) during the 2018-2020 intersessional programme. Finally, the project informs participating States Parties about existing disease monitoring and surveillance mechanisms and should therefore 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.

4. The planned activities 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 regional 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). Furthermore, technical contributions from recognised educational institutions (e.g. the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security and Georgetown University) enhance the scientific and technical aspects of the programme.

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

## III. Project implementation

6. The project's initial report<sup>2</sup> covered the first two thematic seminars in Geneva and the two regional workshops which were carried out in Asia from November 2018 to June 2019. In the period between 1 July 2019 and 12 October 2020, the third thematic seminar and the third regional capacity-building workshop were conducted. While detailed information about these activities has been made available to States Parties on the BWC website<sup>3</sup>, a brief summary of these events is presented below.

7. Planning for the two remaining activities – the fourth thematic seminar and the fourth regional workshop - were at an advanced stage and scheduled to take place in March 2020. However, both events had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Both events will be carried out once the situation allows– the conduct of larger in-person meetings in a safe manner and travel restrictions will be lifted.

### **Thematic seminar (Geneva, Switzerland)**

8. The third thematic seminar took place on 19 November 2019 and was a platform for participants to exchange views on '[Taking Stock of Deliberations on Assistance, Response and Preparedness under the Current Intersessional BWC Programme](#)'<sup>4</sup>. More than 70

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<sup>2</sup> BWC/MSP/2019/MX.4/WP.4, 6-7 August 2019

<sup>3</sup> See [Relevant Activities overseen by the BWC Implementation Support Unit-Voluntary: Voluntary contribution by Japan \(2018-2020\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Report of seminar on "Taking Stock of Deliberations on Assistance, Response and Preparedness under the Current Intersessional BWC Programme"](#)

participants from Permanent Missions of BWC States Parties in Geneva and representatives of international organisations and civil society attended the event at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). During the seminar, a wide range of experts addressed bio-terrorist attacks or accidents involving hazardous biological substances, as well as lessons for national preparedness and the establishment of an Article VII assistance database. Furthermore, participants discussed different aspects of Article VII and shared their views on the assistance, response and preparedness mechanisms which are under discussion in the current BWC intersessional programme. The following issues, *inter alia*, transpired from the discussions:

- Discussions at the seminar clearly highlighted the importance of Article VII as a core element of the Convention as it establishes an element of international solidarity in response to a deliberate biological event. Hence, the creation of an assistance database in the framework of Article VII was a key topic of discussion, initially proposed by France and India at the Preparatory Committee for the Eighth Review Conference in 2016.<sup>5</sup> States Parties at the Eighth Review Conference ‘supported the establishment of a database open to all States Parties to facilitate assistance under the framework of Article VII’<sup>6</sup>. During the seminar, the participating experts shared insights from national, regional, and international perspectives, thus highlighting both the steps required to establish an Article VII database and its potential benefits for States Parties. Furthermore, the potential contents of such a database were discussed, including possible offers and requests for assistance. Participants also discussed other relevant assistance databases, such as the Article X database of the Chemical Weapons Convention, while noting the lessons learned from these examples.
- Participants stressed that it is crucial to identify the actual needs that the database should address, so that the database becomes a means to an end and not an end in itself. Furthermore, experts highlighted that it is imperative to involve relevant stakeholders (i.e. data contributors and users of the database) early in the development stage and clearly identify their requirements and expectations; furthermore, and in order to remain relevant for the users, the database needs to be maintained and datasets need to be regularly updated; it was also pointed out that regular feedback on areas for improvement of the database should be sought from the user community.
- Seminar discussions also addressed the potential synergies between databases for Article VII and Article X of the Convention. In this context, the importance of avoiding a duplication of efforts was highlighted, as might occur when the same information is collected twice. The seminar participants agreed that BWC States Parties should promote mechanisms to synergise the implementation of Articles VII and X.
- The seminar also highlighted the importance of gender equality and gender’s role in assistance processes. The participants noted that the success of an assistance mission relies crucially on sufficient consideration being given to the role of women in the process.
- The final part of the seminar featured a panel of experts on assistance, response and preparedness issues addressed at MX4 meetings in 2018 and 2019 with a view on upcoming discussions at the BWC Ninth Review Conference planned for November 2021. While the panellists acknowledged the progress made on these issues, they also encouraged States Parties to further increase their efforts on the operationalisation of Article VII, focussing in particular on the establishment of an assistance database and a procedure and format of request for assistance under Article VII.

<sup>5</sup> [BWC/CONF.VIII/PC/WP.38](#), dated 16 August 2016 (re-submitted to the 2018 MSP as [BWC/MSP/2018/WP.7](#))

<sup>6</sup> [BWC/CONF.VIII/4](#), dated 11 January 2017: Final Document of the Eighth Review Conference: II. Final Declaration, Article VII, paragraph 47

**Regional capacity-building workshop (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)**

9. From 1 to 2 October 2019, the BWC ISU, in close collaboration with the government of Malaysia, organised ‘[The Second Regional Workshop for ASEAN States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention on Preparedness to Respond to the Deliberate Use of Biological Weapons](#)’<sup>7</sup> in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The workshop was the second of three to be conducted in the ASEAN region. Its programme was designed based on the feedback collected during the first regional workshop which was carried out from 6 to 7 June 2019 in Bangkok, Thailand.<sup>8</sup>

10. More than fifty experts from ASEAN Member States (Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam) attended the workshop. They shared and enhanced their knowledge about important elements of a response operation to a deliberate biological event, as well as about the operational and decision-making capacities required at the national and sub-regional level to respond to the deliberate use of biological weapons. Further contributions to the workshop were made by scientific experts from the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, Georgetown University as well as technical experts from Germany and the United Kingdom.

11. In the course of the workshop, the following issues, *inter alia*, were highlighted:

- The workshop participants acknowledged the complexity of shifting response efforts from a biological event of natural origin to a deliberate use scenario including identification of triggers. They also underscored that the capability to respond effectively and efficiently to a deliberate biological event relies on a well implemented national programme for bio preparedness.
- Furthermore, the success of a response to a biological event, whether of natural or deliberate origin, depends on coordinated multi-sectoral cooperation at the national level, most notably among the public health and security sector. The participants also emphasised the crucial role of command and control and a national coordination mechanism to achieve the multi-sectoral cooperation during the response to a biological event.
- The interactive exercises at the workshop highlighted that a thorough initial risk assessment will enhance risk and consequence mitigation related measures.
- The discussions at the workshop underlined that response teams could also play a valuable role in the investigation process of deliberate biological events. The creation of such capabilities requires investment and training of qualified resources in public health and law enforcement agencies. Additionally, national investigative capabilities can be augmented by requesting international assistance from other States Parties and international organizations.
- The participants acknowledged that the following activities are the most important contributors to a successful investigation process: i) the creation of a national action plan; ii) the development of standard operating procedures; iii) the establishment of a command and control mechanism as well as a coordination mechanism for a multi-sectoral investigation team; and, iv) the collaboration of national and international teams. Furthermore, conducting tabletop exercises and field exercises at national and regional levels will improve national preparedness and regional cooperation to respond to a deliberate biological event.
- Experts also highlighted the importance of training courses in sample collection, crime scene investigation, and distinguishing a deliberate event from a natural incident as essential elements in future international capacity-building programmes.

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<sup>7</sup> Report of the “Second Regional Workshop for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention on “Preparedness to Respond to the Deliberate Use of Biological Weapons”

<sup>8</sup> Report of the First Regional Workshop for ASEAN States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention on Preparedness to Respond to the Deliberate Use of Biological Weapons - 6-7 June 2019 - Bangkok, Thailand

- Despite diversity between States' strategies for public messaging and risk communication, workshop participants were well aware of the power of social media and its role in public outrage, public awareness and education in times of crises. Participants also noted that public messaging is as important as inter-sectoral communication during a deliberate biological event.

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

12. Two more events are still to be carried out before the end of the project. These events include a one-day thematic seminar on 'Preparing for deliberate bio-threat scenarios at the national level' which was initially planned to take place on 11 March 2020 at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) in Geneva, Switzerland and the 'Third regional workshop for the ASEAN States Parties to the BWC on regional and international collaboration in the case of the deliberate use of biological weapons' which was originally planned to take place from 24 to 26 March 2020 in Manila, the Philippines. Both events were postponed at short notice due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The BWC ISU is exploring the possibilities for organising these events as soon as larger in-person meetings can once again be carried out in a safe manner.

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