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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION
TO THE COUNCIL AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT**

**Civil protection - Progress made in implementing the programme for preparedness for
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1. INTRODUCTION

In response to the request of the Heads of State or Government to improve cooperation between the Member States in preparedness, detection and intervention to reduce the consequences of Nuclear, Radiological¹, Biological and Chemical (NRBC) threats to society, a programme has been drawn up which is described in the Communication of 28 November 2001².

In particular, the Commission undertook to intensify its activities in current actions and programmes, work closely with the national authorities and industry to consolidate measures already taken, and keep the Council and Parliament informed of progress made in implementing the programme.

The present Communication follows up this commitment and sums up the main progress made, in particular in developing and implementing interfaces between the civil protection coordination mechanism, the network for epidemiological surveillance and control of communicable diseases, and activities in key complementary sectors such as research and the pharmaceutical field.

2. THE CIVIL PROTECTION FRAMEWORK

The Communication of November 2001 made it clear how the Commission had brought the various services and networks responsible for civil protection, health protection and research expertise under one heading in order to have at its disposal a common platform to coordinate the European Union's optimum response to all types of emergencies. It described how this common platform was based on the civil protection coordination mechanism³.

Accordingly, the Commission has given absolute priority to the initiatives announced in the Communication of November 2001 concerning civil protection. The initiatives are based on identifying the threats that are deemed to be the most serious or likely to occur, with the five following main pillars.

2.1. Teams of experts for coordinating intervention

The added value of the mechanism largely depends on the availability of experts capable of organising and coordinating intervention teams made available by the Member States.

¹ Radiological threats refers here, for instance, to the theft of isotopic sources for criminal purposes. Such sources placed in public areas could insidiously contaminate many people.

² COM(2001) 707 final, Civil protection - State of preventive alert against possible emergencies.

³ Council Decision 2001/792/EC, Euratom of 23 October 2001 establishing a Community mechanism to facilitate reinforced cooperation in civil protection assistance interventions.

To enable the Commission and the Member States to properly select the experts required and to ensure that the ability of these experts is recognised by all concerned, it was necessary to agree on selection criteria developed, approved and used by the Member States in compiling and supplying lists of experts.

The Commission now has a list of experts available in the Member States with the necessary qualifications in NRBC fields.

2.2. Intervention teams and means that can be made available by the Member States

Within the framework of the mechanism, civil protection intervention capacities are provided by the Member States. To ensure that optimum use can be made of these capacities, a preliminary inventory had to be compiled in order to discern any requirements not sufficiently covered within the European Union.

This stock-taking exercise, which has been extended to the candidate countries and to the countries of the European Economic Area, has provided an overview of the means currently available for various types of interventions (including the response to NRBC risks). In drawing up the inventory of specific means such as serums and vaccines, there has been excellent cooperation with the pharmaceutical sector. Their activities are described in more detail in the section devoted to health protection.

2.3. Training and exercises for intervention teams

Effective use of the coordination mechanism requires the availability of highly qualified personnel with proper experience with this type of exercise and of teams used to working together in a European context.

All the levels involved, from the head of a national intervention team down to the senior official responsible for coordinating the action of national teams, should be fully prepared to be integrated in a Community response to emergencies.

Clearly, such training ought to be an ongoing process; a programme has already been adopted to this effect. The first training courses will start in the next few weeks. They are designed, in particular, to ensure compatibility and complementarity between intervention teams that are likely to be deployed under the mechanism.

For this purpose, the Commission has issued a call for proposals to the relevant services of the Member States with a view to holding one or more full-scale simulation exercises in the field of Nuclear, Radiological, Biological and Chemical terrorist attacks.

The idea is to hold one or more exercises in the last quarter of 2002 in order to ascertain the efficacy of the various components of the new EU civil protection mechanism and particular contingency plans of the Member States. The response capacity of the Member States will be tested and response methods will be validated and adapted where necessary.

Moreover, a programme for exchanging NRBC experts will be set up in September 2002 to disseminate national best practices more effectively and enable information transfer among Member States.

2.4. Emergency communication and information system

The Commission and the Member States have adopted the technical procedures and security constraints of the dedicated communication network that will be established in particular to enable urgent information to be exchanged among Member States in response to NRBC threats.

Establishing a communication system that is powerful and reliable even in emergencies is a formidable challenge which should be met within the framework of the mechanism. The solution adopted will specifically guarantee the authenticity, integrity and confidentiality of information exchanged among Member States under routine conditions and in emergencies.

Provision has of course been made for interlinking this communication system with other existing networks, in particular for radiological and health emergencies. The interconnections will be tested and validated through exercises.

In order, more specifically, to validate and test communication among operational centres, from alert detection to intervention team mobilisation, the Commission has issued a call for proposals to the relevant services of the Member States with a view to holding a communication exercise covering NRBC aspects.

This simulation exercise will be followed by a special workshop to take stock of the action taken by the Member States and the Commission one year after the attacks of 11 September, focusing on the level of preparedness and response of the services concerned and highlighting any additional action required.

2.5. Monitoring and Information Centre

The Monitoring and Information Centre serves as the nerve centre of the mechanism as it is here that decisions are taken on the basis of information received from the various networks and the Member States. This enables the Centre to speed up and facilitate the selection of the most appropriate means of intervention and to ensure ongoing coordination while liaising with the national authorities.

The Centre's work is based on the round-the-clock network of contacts set up very rapidly by the Commission to ensure uninterrupted links with the civil protection centres of the Member States. Through this network there is immediate access to essential information on the expertise available to control the effects of NRBC attacks.

To date, the fifteen Member States, Norway and six candidate countries have supplied this information which will prove to be of crucial importance in the event of an NRBC attack. The information is constantly kept up to date.

A precondition for ensuring the optimum functioning of the Monitoring and Information Centre in times of crisis is of course that the teams working with it are also used to exchanging routine information with their counterparts in the Member States and that they develop a relationship of mutual trust.

Moreover, the human resources available to the Centre have been reinforced, in particular through the support of experts seconded by the Member States. As a result, the personnel on standby has doubled since 1 April 2002. At the same time, the Commission is trying hard to substantially increase the staff that is to be mobilised to implement the mechanism in particular in emergency situations.

The Centre also serves as an interface with other networks likely to be involved in dealing with an emergency. In this framework, appropriate measures will be taken to continue to guarantee optimum coordination between the civil protection network and other networks such as ECURIE (European Community Urgent Radiological Information Exchange). There will of course be cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna.

Finally, it should be noted that the Monitoring and Information Centre maintains important links with the network for epidemiological surveillance and control of communicable diseases.

3. HEALTH PROTECTION

3.1. Initiatives already taken in the health field

Work on extending the network for epidemiological surveillance and control of communicable diseases in the Community⁴ to include pathogenic agents that might be used in bioterrorist attacks, a key element of the EU system for responding to bioterrorist threats, continues with the identification of cases relating to agents that ought to be given priority.

The programme for preparedness and response capacities in the event of attacks involving biological and chemical agents (health security) compiled by the Commission on the instigation of the health ministers of the Member States has been put in place. Substantial progress has been made on the four main pillars of the programme, whose implementation is the responsibility of a task force comprising experts from the Member States:

- A network has been set up that is operational day and night to ensure permanent and swift exchange of information as well as consultation and coordination on health matters potentially involving chemical or biological agents. As a result, the Commission now has at its disposal a mutual consultation mechanism to deal with any crisis involving bioterrorist threats.
- Work is in progress to establish a European-level capacity to detect the principal chemical and biological agents that might be used in an attack and enable rapid detection and diagnosis. The agents that ought to be given priority have been identified and an inventory of existing resources is currently being drawn up.
- The fundamental aspects of the capacity to produce vaccines and medicines and to stockpile and supply them have been discussed with the pharmaceuticals sector (see below). Questions concerning diseases that may affect animals have likewise been discussed in order to increase stocks of vaccines against foot-and-mouth disease, swine fever and bluetongue in sheep.
- The fourth pillar of the programme consisted of drawing up and publishing rules and advice on health measures to be taken in response to attacks, coordinating the Union's response and relations with third countries and international organisations, with work focusing primarily on cooperation with third countries and international organisations.

⁴ Decision 2119/98/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 September 1998 setting up a network for the epidemiological surveillance and control of communicable diseases in the Community.

3.2. Cooperation with third countries and international organisations

Following the meeting of the G7 ministers of health held in Ottawa on 7 November in which the Commission and Mexico also took part, a network composed of high representatives was established to deal with crises at international level.

A Global Health Security Action Group has also been set up to implement the plan worked out in Ottawa. It has opened a website with restricted access to enable exchange of information and rules on health intervention plans, monitoring of diseases, contamination of water and food chains, and guidelines for services providing care. The Group has also initiated action relating to the purchase and storage of medicines, in particular smallpox vaccines. Its work includes questions of communication and risk management and it has compiled a programme for interlinking P4 laboratories (laboratories equipped to study the most dangerous viruses).

Through the network developed under the European Enter-net programme, all Member States as well as the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Pan American Health Organisation and the European Commission are now interconnected and can swiftly exchange data from national surveillance systems and information on particular types of suspect cases such as contamination of food and water supply chains.

The countries participating in this initiative and the Commission have decided to test these procedures and the contingency plans. They will also compile a common seriousness scale for events such as the deliberate discharge of biological and chemical agents and work out strategies for isolation techniques.

The Commission is also working with the WHO on activities concerning bioterrorism, not only in the context of the initiatives taken in Ottawa but also with a view to improving operational aspects of the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network and of its integrated approach towards strengthening epidemiology and laboratory capacity.

The Commission has supported the adoption, and actively participates in the implementation, of the WHO resolution on the deliberate use of biological and chemical agents and radio-nuclear attacks which urges Member States to respond "by sharing expertise, supplies and resources in order to rapidly contain the event and mitigate its effects".

The candidate countries have also been informed of the Union's action in the field of bioterrorism.

3.3. Action in the pharmaceutical field

Action taken in the pharmaceutical field has clearly provided the civil protection mechanism with strategic resources for the fight against terrorism.

The Commission has first of all set up a joint Commission - pharmaceutical industry task force which has given priority to examining a number of delicate questions, in particular drawing up an inventory of the availability and capacities of production, stockpiles and distribution of serums, vaccines and antibiotics likely to be used to counter any bacteriological attack.

The information obtained is exchanged on a specific network created through the Pharmaceutical Committee. At the Commission's request, moreover, the European Agency for the Evaluation of Medicinal Products has set up two working parties, one responsible for compiling a guide on the use of medicines for potential pathogens and the other for drawing up more specific recommendations concerning vaccines in general and smallpox vaccine in particular. Guidance on how to deal with smallpox will be published by the end of June.

Crucial questions discussed in this connection with the pharmaceutical sector include creating and pooling strategic stockpiles, evaluating production capacity for vaccines, serums and antibiotics, and developing new medicines and vaccines. The Commission continues to examine possible options specifically for creating strategic stockpiles at EU level.

4. RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

The Research Council of 30 October 2001 endorsed the Commission's initiative to create a group of experts on research and development, composed of representatives appointed by the ministers for research.

One of the tasks accomplished by this group has been the compilation of an inventory of research activities in the chemical and biological fields at national and EU level. On the basis of this inventory, the group has drawn up a number of recommendations which will be submitted to the Research Council of 18 June.

These recommendations form part of the Commission's strategy to establish a European Research Area which through the sixth framework programme for research (2003-2006) provides an appropriate structure and makes it possible to make full use of the research potential in Europe, in particular by enabling genuine coordination among Member States.

Against this background, the group of experts has stressed the Commission's pivotal role in coordinating initiatives taken in the Member States, in particular in supporting surveillance and investigative activities and in such areas as risk assessment, physical protection and training.

The group has also presented proposals on research areas that can be covered by the priority themes of the new programme or under the heading "supporting policies and anticipating scientific and technological needs". Priority areas include the development of rapid methods of detecting chemical and biological agents and the development of new vaccines and therapeutic strategies for use in countering any biological attacks.

These proposals back up the work done within the Health and Safety Committee and are perfectly consistent with the conclusions of the workshop held in Florival in December 2001 which brought together experts from the Member States and the Commission mainly in the fields of health, research and civil protection. The key role of research was emphasised at the workshop, in particular in strengthening the scientific basis required for NRBC surveillance activities.

The group of experts has deemed it useful to continue its work to provide the Commission with an appropriate network and a tool for guiding the research efforts required in the European Research Area. The group has stressed that all activities relating to the conclusions of the Ghent summit ought to continue to be coordinated at Commission level.

The Joint Research Centre (JRC) has embarked upon two prospective studies on vulnerabilities to bioterrorism and the implication for science. Moreover, a bioresponse working party composed of experts from the Member States has been set up to evaluate whether a terrorist would really be able to introduce deliberately transformed organisms into the agro-food chain and assess the potential consequences of specific scenarios involving such attacks. The updating of the database on technology and equipment relating to the fight against chemical and biological terrorism ensures that the Member States have a central source of crucial information at their disposal.

Finally, in parallel with the work of the research and development group, a pilot study has been launched by the Commission. This study is intended to observe and analyse the mechanisms through which scientific advice given in the event of anthrax/bioterrorism can be conducive to interaction among the social actors (scientists, political decision-makers, the media, civic and public society) and influence political action.

5. CONCLUSION

The important progress made in recent months has made it possible to implement the actions announced by the Commission and thus meet the expectations of the Heads of State and Government.

Thanks to the sound cooperation among all the Member States and excellent coordination of work and resources available in the various areas, it has been possible to make considerable progress in sectors such as civil protection, health and research, which are particularly sensitive to Nuclear, Radiological, Biological and Chemical threats.

A country hit by a disaster can now count not only on EU resources in all fields and in particular in the field of civil protection, health and research but also on the assistance of intervention teams that are multinational, complementary and used to working together. These teams, which will have the latest technical resources at their disposal, will be coordinated under the Commission's responsibility by the European experts best qualified to deal with this type of disaster.

Work on implementing the mechanism will still have to pursue two main lines of action. First, the establishment of a genuine dedicated communication network, reliable even in emergencies, will require a considerable amount of work for development and integration. Second, simulation exercises will have to be held regularly to ensure the smooth functioning of all components of the civil protection coordination mechanism.

These substantial advances will be further enhanced and will benefit from a phase of practical tests. The aim of this parallel approach is to contribute to facing the NRBC challenge which the Commission undertook to meet in its Communication of November 2001.

In the field of health, the Union has already established an efficient mechanism for rapid alert and coordinated management of health aspects of crises precipitated by a biological or chemical attack. Current work on surveillance and laboratory research should in the near future enable rapid detection and treatment of disease and contamination involving biological and chemical agents following criminal acts.

In the research field, the Commission will strive to implement the recommendations of the research and development group of experts in the context of the sixth framework programme, continue to coordinate research activities and ensure exchange of information between Member States.

In the pharmaceutical field, work on developing new vaccines and stockpiles has already led to significant advances; this work will continue. At the same time, a system for centrally coordinating distribution networks throughout the Union will be developed, with possible amendments being made to legislation on pharmaceuticals with a view to facilitating a response to bioterrorist threats. The results of the work described above concerning vaccines and other medicines to counter bioterrorism will be taken into account in drafting proposals for action at EU level, in particular with regard to reserve stockpiling.

This Communication shows how the means and tools for coordination and information exchange among Member States and between the Member States and the Commission have been improved in recent months. These advances enhance the efficiency of measures already taken at national level in countering Nuclear, Radiological, Biological and Chemical (NRBC) threats.

Work is in progress to further improve this coordination, and a series of additional measures has been identified and highlighted in this Communication. These additional measures will be worked out as soon as possible within the framework of existing EU tools.

Finally, it should be noted that all the efforts made to respond specifically to the new threats in the NRBC field will, of course, also enhance the capacity to respond and the quality of such response to any natural disaster or major technological accident in and outside the Union.