

## **The World Organisation for Animal Health in support of the Biological and Toxins Weapon Convention and acts against bioterrorism**

### **Introduction**

The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) has on more than one occasion stated its commitment to work within the framework of the Biological and Toxins Weapon Convention (BTWC). The OIE has also with the support of the FAO (Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations) and the WHO (World Health Organisation) indicated to the States Party to the Convention, that the most effective way of preventing bioterrorism using animal pathogens, is to strengthen the ability and capacity of the national Veterinary Services of countries to early detect, diagnose and respond to incidental or deliberate disease incursions within the guidelines, recommendations and international standards of the OIE that are mandated by the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The OIE fully realizes and acknowledge the fact that 60% of human pathogens are zoonotic; that 80% of animal pathogens are multi-host; that 80% of pathogenic agents having a potential bioterrorist use are zoonotic and that animal diseases can today with the effects of globalization and the speed of international traffic, spread faster across the globe than the average incubation period of most diseases. The OIE therefore also accepts the obligation and responsibility of the veterinary profession to create an effective buffer between the animal source of the disease and the need for human and animal safety and health. The prevention of zoonoses, ensuring food security and ensuring that the veterinary services of countries are equipped and capable to face, manage and minimize the threats and possible disastrous effects of incidental or deliberate animal disease incursions - are non-negotiable commitments of the World Organisation for Animal Health.

The OIE has therefore, to enable countries to meet these commitments and obligations, initiated several actions and strategies to create a global awareness and acceptance of the delivery of veterinary services as an international public good – a concept that encompass the total acceptance of the fact that unfortunate incidents of deliberate spread of animal diseases to endanger human and animal health and food security, can only be counteracted, prevented or minimized by a veterinary service that are capacitated to do so.

### **Actions initiated by the OIE to counteract bioterrorism**

- *International standards for control of animal diseases and zoonosis and the facilitation of trade in animals and animal products*

The OIE is recognized within the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement (SPS Agreement) of the WTO as the international reference body for the guidelines,

recommendations and standards for the control of and trade in terrestrial and aquatic animals. These standards are continuously revised and updated under the guidance of Specialist Commissions of expertise selected by the International Committee of the OIE. These standards, guidelines and recommendations, once adopted by the International Committee comprising the 167 Member Countries of the OIE, are the recommended minimum standards that should be applied by Member Countries and where possible also reflected in the national legislation of Member Countries. By doing this, the OIE creates a mechanism for Member Countries for not only having a scientific basis to counteract bioterrorism but also to have a platform for negotiation between countries.

- *Addressing the need of Member Countries to move towards compliance with standards*

It could be reasoned that the weaker the ability of the veterinary services of a country is to control animal diseases, the more prone they would be to become a target for acts of bioterrorism or agro terrorism. The OIE has therefore embarked on a unique strategic initiative to develop an assessment and evaluation system to assist countries to identify weaknesses in their system that makes it difficult for them to comply with the minimum standards, guidelines and recommendations of the OIE. The evaluation system based on the performance, strategy and vision of a country to move towards compliance (commonly referred to as the PVS-strategy) is already in operation and applied successfully in a number of developing and in-transition countries. For this purpose the OIE has selected experienced veterinarians from Member Countries and trained them to become OIE accredited evaluators. Whenever a request is received from a Member Country to be evaluated, an expert team is constituted by the OIE who does a thorough investigation of the country according to criteria agreed upon by the International Committee of the OIE, covering aspects of veterinary service delivery such as technical capability, human and financial capital, interaction with the private sector and the needs and problems associated with access to markets. The OIE has, by linking this initiative to its overall aim to establish awareness and acceptance of the delivery of veterinary services as an international public good, elicited major financial support for this project from the World Bank and other donors, including some of the more financial affluent Member Countries of the OIE. Although the current global H5N1 avian influenza threat has given impetus to this initiative, the long term advantages for countries who were subjected to a PVS-evaluation, would be to enable them to also cope with other disease emergencies that might occur – including acts of bioterrorism.

- *Improving transparency in the reporting and exchange of information on the occurrence of animal diseases*

Three key elements are essential for any country to cope with a disease emergency – *early detection, early diagnosis* and *rapid response*. An essential prerequisite for a country to be able to rapidly respond and to put neighboring countries and trade partners on the alert, is to be timely informed and to be in possession of all

information relevant to such an incursion. The OIE as the worldwide observatory for animal health, has established an International Early Warning System which has kept pace with new developments in information technology to enable the rapid distribution of information to all of its 167 Member Countries and other stakeholders. All Member Countries of the OIE are obliged to inform the OIE Central Bureau within 24 hours of the occurrence of any unusual epidemiological event – such as for instance an act of bioterrorism involving the use of animal pathogens. This information is then immediately conveyed to all Member Countries to enable them to be prepared and rapidly institute control measures where necessary. The OIE also has a network of 180 Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres that in addition serves as the *eyes and ears* of the Central Bureau to compliment and verify information on animal diseases. This information system is further complimented by a system of verification of non-official information that might appear in the media, scientific papers and disease news reports on the Internet.

The OIE has also in close collaboration with the FAO embarked on a new initiative : the Global Framework for the Progressive Control of Transboundary Animal Diseases (GF-TADs) which is based on a regional approach to animal disease control and constitutes an essential component of the OIE and FAO disease information and epidemiological intelligence system. The GF-TADs initiative will now be further expanded by the establishment of Animal Health Centres in selected countries within the respective regions.

Integral to the GF-TADs initiative is the Global Early Warning System (GLEWS) which by a recently signed agreement between the OIE, FAO and WHO, established a procedure to assist stakeholders and the international community to predict and prevent livestock animal disease threats through epidemiological analysis and the integration of additional factors that might have an impact on the occurrence and spread of diseases – such as threats of bioterrorism, civil unrest, climatic changes, etc. An important component of the system is the linkage with the human/animal pathogen interface by sharing complimentary information with the WHO on zoonotic diseases and animal diseases that could endanger human health for example in the unfortunate event of deliberate spread of animal pathogens. The OIE/FAO designated Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres will constitute an important contributor in the GLEWS for providing specific analysis and modeling trends.

## **Conclusion**

The OIE shares with all its Member Countries the common concern about the potential devastating effects inherent to any act of deliberate misuse or spread of biological pathogens that can affect human and animal health and food and animal production. The OIE is committed to take hands with its colleagues in the FAO and WHO to enhance the aims and objects of the Biological and Toxins Weapon Convention by assisting countries to acquire the ability and expertise to apply the international standards, guidelines and recommendations of the OIE to cope with not only such unfortunate emergencies but also

with any major animal and zoonotic disease that might affect animal or human health. To this end, reciprocal support from the United Nations for the commitment of the OIE to put these initiatives into action and to convince all governments to implement all OIE standards adopted by them, would further enhance the common message of global preparedness that will be send out to perpetrators of any intended act of bioterrorism.