VERTIC’s Tabletop Exercise on UNSGM Investigations of Alleged BW Use

Meeting of States Parties to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention
3 December 2019, Geneva, Switzerland
VERTIC’s Project on UNSGM

- Project Goal
  - Support the development of the UN Secretary General’s operational capability for investigating the alleged use of biological weapons
  - Complement initiatives

- Method
  - Research with partners on ideas and lessons from response to CW use in Syria, institutional coordination during Amerithrax, new (non-)bioscience technology
  - Table Top Exercise at Royal Society, London in Nov 2019
Purpose of the TTX

• Identify challenges that may arise during a UNSGM mission and possible mitigation strategies

• Explore issues of coordination and cooperation between deployed UNSGM team and key stakeholders

• Explore procedural issues related to some of the crucial aspects of an investigation
Key Stakeholders

- UNSGM team
- National public health authorities
- National security/law enforcement authorities
- UNHQ, UNSGM community and international expert community
- International humanitarian relief organisations
Stages of the investigation covered

- Information-sharing and information collection during formulation of UNSGM team’s programme of work
- Arrangement of access to locations and individuals of interest
- Collection, handling and shipment of samples
TTX Participants

- VERTIC secured high-level participants with field experience and direct responsibilities in a range of sectors:
  - Former investigators/heads of missions
  - WHO representatives
  - National public health coordinators with responsibilities for CBRN emergency planning and response
  - National law enforcement/counterterrorism CBRN specialists
  - International humanitarian relief practitioners
  - United Nations personnel with experience in coordination and operations
The Scenario: Alleged BW use in a fictional country

- Rural region of a lower-middle income country, destabilised by urbanisation and climate change
- Historical tensions between two different communities with a history of sporadic violence
- Outbreak of a zoonotic disease, chiefly affecting farms and areas populated by one of the two communities
- 80 dead, 300+ in treatment over 4 weeks
- Suspicion that the agent has been deliberately released by contaminating animal enclosures and water reservoirs
Findings: Frameworks

• Different actors will view the situation from different perspectives
  – challenges from stakeholders will emerge from their mandate, priorities and points of view

• Understanding and mapping these frameworks in advance can help the team anticipate challenges and adapt to them
Findings: Cross-Cutting Issues

• **Procedural and institutional channels:** understanding how institutions operate in the country is necessary to work with them, e.g.
  – Authorities active at the local level may still believe they require authorisation from capital for every exchange
  – Corruption can be a factor

• **Work on the ground requires interfacing with diverse communities:** Formal authorities are not the only relevant stakeholders, e.g.
  – Minority communities and ethnic groups may have different points of view and other information
  – Presence of national authority may reduce the confidence in the UNSGM team’s impartiality
  – Gender is a factor: women’s voices and perspectives may not be represented in local communities and authorities
Findings: Public Health and Humanitarian Relief

Perspective

• **Confidentiality** of personal details: UNSGM team will always have to ensure data is treated appropriately.

• **Consent of patients** to all activities: including interviews and taking of samples; additional challenge with unconscious patients.

• **Continuity of care**: activities of a UNSGM team may disrupt the ability of public health officials to deliver care.

• **Trust of patients**: care providers may fear jeopardising trust and access to communities by letting UNSGM team in:
  – especially in conflict areas and by international humanitarian relief workers.
  – UNSGM role and mandate is not well known to general public, so it may be difficult to explain to patients.
  – In some contexts, the presence of national authorities accompanying investigators (as is their right) can exacerbate this issue.
Findings: Law Enforcement Perspective

- Protection of criminal proceedings is top priority: sharing of information and granting of access very unlikely if that has the potential to jeopardise a national criminal investigation.
  - A LE officer said they may accept to share information, on the stipulation that it is only published/released further after national proceedings are concluded.

- Public order and security: Law enforcement authorities need to guarantee the security of the UNSGM team, and guarantee order even after the team has left.
  - A visit by UNSGM team may be an inflammatory event in certain contexts. LE authorities may fear disorders even after the team has collected evidence and left.

- Protection of sources and methods by national security authorities/ intelligence
Findings: UNSGM Perspective – UN HQ

• UN HQ has a crucial role in supporting the deployed mission – part of the same team

• Planning and definition of the mission’s mandate are essential

• ‘Reach-back support’ can take many forms:
  – Advice and technical analysis are the most commonly understood: from ‘hub’ laboratories to additional information analysis, to expert advice from technical specialists
  – Equally important but perhaps underestimated is area knowledge: linguistic skills, knowledge of local culture, politics and institutions and how to engage with them. Diplomatic support in engaging with the host country’s government.
Findings: UNSGM - Deployed UNSGM Team

- UNSGM Head of Mission as a direct representative of UNSG in the field:
  - it is crucial for mission success that they are a respected and authoritative figure and that their authority is supported by the UN system.

- Hybrid approach to guidance and procedures:
  - Key activities related to collecting evidence will need detailed Standard Operating Procedures to ensure high evidential standards
  - Other aspects can be covered by simplified checklists and aide-memoires

- ‘Adapt and Explain’: the team will constantly need to adapt to changing demands and conditions. It is important it documents and explains its actions with integrity.

- Conditions may not allow to collect information and evidence up to standards
  - This is still valuable as secondary data: informs decisions on which leads and clues should be followed up on
Findings: Lessons Learned

• Difficulty in applying lessons learned from individual missions:
  – Much data has remained confidential
  – A crucial step would be to have former investigators collect lessons and write field guides

• Resources for UNSGM are a challenge:
  – A training programme is now being developed
  – Some guidelines and SOPs can be adapted from different mechanisms, e.g. CTBTO health and safety instructions

• Equipment: challenge is not technology, but accreditation

• Most crucial challenge, unforeseen at the time: the investigation, and individual investigators, will have to work under the pressure of constant and pervasive scrutiny
Thank you!

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