INTERAGENCY COORDINATION IN THE EVENT OF A TERRORIST ATTACK USING CHEMICAL OR BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS OR MATERIALS

Executive Summary

The Working Group on Preventing and Responding to Weapons of Mass Destruction Attacks (the Working Group) is one of the groups through which certain activities of the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) are organized to support the implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. The CTITF was established by the Secretary-General in 2005 to ensure the coordination and coherence of UN system-wide counter-terrorism efforts. It now consists of 31 entities from the United Nations system and other international organizations.

This report is the second put forward by the Working Group. It aims to familiarize Member States with existing mechanisms in individual entities of the Working Group, as well as interagency mechanisms, in the context of the preparedness for, prevention of and response to terrorist attacks using chemical or biological weapons and materials. It also identifies opportunities for strengthening this coordination. In addition, the report aims at identifying new opportunities for strengthening prevention and incident response with regard to such attacks.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Whilst in the area of nuclear and radiological terrorism it is relatively easy to identify lead agencies, there are a large number of UN and other international agencies and organizations that have partial mandates and undertake certain activities in the area of prevention of, preparedness for and response to possible terrorist attacks with chemical or biological weapons or materials. There is, however, no single lead agency that bears overall responsibility for the response to these threats at the international level. Instead, there is an array of inter-locking responsibilities. Activities of UN and other international entities address specific aspects of the threat of chemical or biological terrorism (some in a technically-specialised manner, others in a broader Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) context) but no one agency can claim overall responsibility for either chemical or biological terrorism preparedness and response.

Coordination among the concerned entities is therefore of the utmost importance and the thrust of the recommendations deals with how this coordination can be enhanced. The recommendations address prevention and preparedness, as well as the actions of UN and other international entities in response to terrorist attacks using chemical or biological weapons or materials.

- First, UN and other international entities that provide technical assistance to States in the prevention of and preparedness for chemical and biological terrorism should more
effectively share information and experiences so as to ensure that the technical assistance provided by them is tailored to the needs and circumstances of the States receiving them. This is important to ensure a systematic approach towards needs assessment and capacity building of States—the primary responders to terrorist attacks using chemical or biological weapons or materials.

- Second, the measures to develop and enhance preparedness against chemical and biological weapons use by terrorists should be pursued in a broader CBRN context. At the same time, preparedness must address the entire spectrum of chemical and biological risk factors, from naturally occurring diseases to chemical or biological accidents to deliberate releases, including by criminals and terrorists.

- Third, organizations and entities that provide or facilitate legal assistance with regard to the adoption and national application of instruments relevant to countering chemical and biological terrorism, such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the Implementation Support Unit for the Biological Weapons Convention (ISU/BWC), the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the UN Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), should enhance their coordination and information sharing. CTITF could facilitate the institutionalization of a platform for regular exchanges between these organizations.

- Fourth, technical assistance programmes to prepare for and prevent terrorist attacks involving the use of chemical or biological weapons or materials should take a stronger regional approach so as to increase effectiveness, impact and sustainability. Regional approaches encourage ownership within the region and often lead to more effective and robust solutions to security problems in a given context.

- Fifth, with respect to the emergency relief response to situations involving the use of chemical or biological weapons that have a potential of causing mass casualties, the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) mechanism should be formally adopted as the mechanism for coordinating relief efforts and arrangements should be made accordingly involving OPCW, the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

- Sixth, better coordination is needed at the international level in the area of training and exercises to prepare to respond to terrorist uses of chemical or biological weapons. Different forms of training and exercises are important, from specialized skill-oriented training to table-top and command post exercises and full-scale field exercises.

- Seventh, with regard to early warning and detection of chemical or biological releases, the study concludes that as the existing systems for disease surveillance and early warning of disease outbreaks are being further enhanced, the coordination between the different
systems for human, animal and plant disease surveillance and systems in place to protect the food chain should be improved. Also, response measures relate to biological attacks on plants and animals require additional attention given the risks to the food chain as well as the potential economic impact of such attacks.

- Eighth, the working relationship between INTERPOL, organizations that have mandates to investigate alleged uses of chemical or biological weapons (OPCW, UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA)), organizations with mandates in the response to incidents involving such weapons (OPCW, OCHA) and organizations that as part of their mandate in public and animal health will have a role (WHO, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), OIE) should be further enhanced. This is important to ensure that the objectives of an incident response to save lives can be met as best as possible whilst appreciating the fact that the incident scene is a crime scene and that steps must be taken to preserve evidence and to apprehend the perpetrators.

- Nine, more attention should be given to the recovery phase after a chemical or biological agent release by terrorists: there is a need to develop concepts for technical assistance and advice with regard to decontamination in urban areas after such attacks, and to strengthen assistance and advice regarding medical treatment and recovery after a chemical or biological attack by terrorists. To fill these gaps, coordinated action will be needed involving all relevant organizations and agencies that have in-house technical expertise in these areas or that can facilitate access to such expertise from their networks and partners (including OPCW, ISU/BWC, WHO, FAO and OIE).

- Finally, better preparations and coordination are needed of managing public information in crisis situations caused by chemical or biological terrorism attacks. The technical complexity of such situations, the involvement of multiple actors at the international scene, and the absence of a single lead agency are all factors that pose challenges for an authoritative, accurate, consistent and timely release of information to the public by the different agencies concerned. It is important to have an information sharing and coordination mechanism in place in the form of a Crisis Communications Group, to agree on its modalities in advance and to review its operation from time to time so that in times of crisis, it can be activated without delay and continue to function smoothly throughout the crisis.