

Ninth Review Conference 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

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**Consideration of issues identified in the review of the operation of the Convention
as provided for in its Article XII and any possible consensus follow-up action**

Online Training Course for Biological Weapons Convention National Contact Points in Southeast Asia: A Model Approach for Other Regions

Submitted by Japan

I. Introduction

1. Japan is a strong supporter of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) and attaches particular importance to the implementation of all articles of the Convention and expressed interest in contributing actively to the current BWC intersessional programme, most notably towards strengthening the capacity of BWC National Contact Points (NCPs) in Southeast Asia, as well as supporting States Parties in the region to submit their Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs). Hence, in 2018 Japan provided a voluntary contribution of \$80,000 to the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs for a project on “Training of BWC National Contact Points in Southeast Asia”.

2. In December 2019, the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) initiated discussions with Singapore as a potential host country for the NCP training workshop. Singapore formally confirmed its willingness to host the workshop in January 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic the workshop had to be postponed. Acknowledging the importance of not losing momentum, Japan and the ISU explored alternative options and agreed to develop and conduct an online training course for the BWC NCPs in Southeast Asia. The course was intended to adapt to the constraints imposed by the pandemic while retaining as many as possible of the original objectives of the workshop. The course demonstrated that online training can be an effective tool and that, due to reduced costs, it could actually increase the amount of training opportunities available to States Parties.

3. This paper describes the implementation and outcome of the online training course with a view to sharing information so that the approach could be implemented in other regions. The paper will also briefly highlight activities which are planned for the remainder of the project period.

II. Training course objectives

4. The online training course aimed to:
- Explain the roles and responsibilities of NCPs;
 - Provide training on selected aspects of national implementation, including sharing best practices in developing legislation and action plans and the preparation and submission of CBMs;



- Serve as a platform for information exchange among NCPs;
- Contribute to building an informal regional network of NCPs in Southeast Asia;
- Serve as a model for similar such activities in other regions to create a functioning global network of NCPs; and
- Encourage States Parties that have not yet nominated an NCP to do so and provide them with relevant information and useful tools on the nomination process.

5. While the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed constraints and obstacles to international cooperation and multilateral interactions, this course was a tentative step to keep the momentum on and sought to foster a sense of community among the Asian NCPs, strived to build a network, and contributed to enhance and share information between States in the region.

III. Training course structure and implementation

6. The online training course was internally designed by the BWC ISU. Prior to the commencement of the course, all participants were required to complete a questionnaire which sought their views on their expectations of the running of the online course, the topics to be discussed and the outcome they hoped to achieve. Participants could also describe the challenges they are facing as NCP and describe the range of assistance they identified for national implementation of the BWC. The course consisted of four thematic modules relevant to the Convention's national implementation processes, conducted over two weeks. The participants followed the modules via live sessions (approximately 90 minutes per session) and self-paced learning materials, which together represented the equivalent of a two-day in-person workshop. The modules were as follows:

- Module I provided a comprehensive introduction to the BWC and was delivered as an interactive live session. It was comprised of an overview of the Convention, the current intersessional programme and the Ninth Review Conference, as well as the role and function of the NCPs. Important topics such as cooperation and assistance under Article X and assistance, response and preparedness under Article VII were also discussed.
- Module II was comprised of self-paced learning and reading materials on the topics covered during Module I and in preparation for Module III. Materials included links to the BWC website, background documents on the BWC and access to pre-recorded videos introducing participants to the topic of CBMs, including the CBM forms, preparation and submission process.
- Module III was dedicated to national implementation of the BWC and the sharing of best practices by States Parties in the region. It comprised self-paced learning materials, including pre-recorded videos by the Verification Research, Training and Information Centre (VERTIC) on BWC national implementation and its legal framework, by Japan on the national CBM process and by Malaysia on BWC national implementation practices.
- Module IV was delivered as a live event, in the format of an active-learning exercise on the preparation and submission of CBMs. The exercise was based on a fictitious scenario, in which the participants worked to complete mock CBM forms for a State Party preparing and submitting its CBM forms for the first time.

7. In order to promote interactive connections and networking, participants were encouraged to make comments and raise questions during the live events and interact with the ISU staff members, the international instructors, as well as with each other during the self-paced learning time. The ISU remained available for bilateral coaching or assistance upon request throughout the two-week duration of the course.

8. A virtual reception was organised during the first week of the course to allow participants to connect informally and promote regional networking.

9. After the course, all participants were invited to provide their feedback on the course to the ISU to assess whether it met the intended objectives and to inform the design of possible similar courses in the future.

IV. Participation

10. A total of 19 experts from eight States Parties (Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam) participated in the course. It is noteworthy that 90% of participants were female. The course participants represented public and animal health, science and technology institutes, military, and diplomatic sectors.

V. Issues raised and challenges faced by NCPs

11. Two weeks before the start of the training course, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire seeking their views on the main areas in which they required information and assistance. The following areas were identified by the participants:

- Introduction to the BWC and basic background information, such as the definition of a biological weapon, the main provisions of the Convention and its history.
- National implementation of the BWC, including legislation, prevention and mitigation, emergency response and biosafety and biosecurity.
- Assistance, response and preparedness under Article VII.
- Cooperation and assistance under Article X.
- Biorisk-related issues: risk assessment, risk management and prevention and mitigation of biological risks.
- Training for the preparation and submission of CBMs.
- Updates on recent developments within the BWC and its current work programme.

12. The questionnaire also sought participants' views on the challenges they faced when fulfilling their duties, including those related to the CBMs submission process. The participants identified the following issues:

- Communication and reporting processes (interaction with other agencies, collection of information, including CBMs):
 - Lack of clear authority to exercise their mandate.
 - Lack of awareness from other ministries or institutions on the role of NCPs.
 - Difficulties to collect data or receive updates from related ministries.
- The BWC's position in the political agenda:
 - Lack of awareness of the importance and relevance of the BWC from all relevant national stakeholders, including decision makers, policy makers, management and operational staff.
 - Challenges in engaging the scientific community, as well as outreach to the general community.
- Multidisciplinary nature of the BWC:
 - The complexity and multidisciplinary nature of the Convention requires technical knowledge in many areas (biology, legislation and regulation, security, diplomacy etc.) and a multi-agency approach and coordination is usually needed.

13. For all the reasons stated above, the collection and submission of data to be included in CBMs represents a challenge, in terms of quality, and in terms of collating the data in a timely manner.

VI. Practical lessons learned

14. The ISU conducted the online training course instead of an in-person two-day workshop to continue implementation support activities despite the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was the first online training course organised and delivered by the ISU, in close consultation with Japan. This initiative could be used as a model for training and assistance activities in other regions, both during the Covid-19 pandemic, and beyond.

15. Course participants agreed that the online training course was a useful innovation and expressed satisfaction that the course achieved their expectations, particularly in addressing the issues and challenges referred to in Section V above. While the course highlighted the difficulties in facilitating interaction between participants in an online environment as compared to an in-person workshop, the balanced ratio between live sessions and self-study lessons over two weeks kept the participants motivated and engaged.

16. Based on feedback from the course participants and following discussions with the ISU, Japan has identified the following lessons:

- Course participants agreed that the online training course was useful in comparison to other training methodologies in informing them about specific BWC subjects. This satisfaction was shared by 82% of participants who believed that course had fully met its training objectives. Furthermore, 83% of the participants evaluated the course as a whole as either “good” or “excellent”. In this regard, 100% of course participants agreed that they had a better understanding of the BWC provisions, history, role and function of NCPs, and a better understanding of the CBM forms and the CBM submission process by the end of the training course.
- In terms of the online training platform, 82% of participants agreed that live sessions, pre-recorded videos and presentations as well as available online resources was an effective blend of learning styles to share information.
- The course participants stressed that the self- paced study methodology used in online training course gave them the chance to absorb the technical issues at their own pace and convenience. Additionally, learning about other national success stories and challenges assisted them to have a better understanding of roles and responsibilities of a NCP at the national level.
- The course organizers concluded that keeping a balanced ratio between live sessions and self-study lessons (e.g. pre-recorded training videos) is of paramount importance and will keep the participants motivated to closely follow the subjects. In addition, conducting interactive exercises on specific BWC issues made the course attractive and intellectually inspiring. The organizers believe that preparation of short educational videos on some relevant subjects such as a virtual visit to a BSL-4 laboratory and interviews with infectious disease specialists or epidemiologists to explain the threat of biological weapons will help future training courses.
- One interesting part of the course was the interactive exercise in which a fictitious scenario was developed and was adapted for training activities. The exercise injects were added to encourage the participants to use self-paced study with an aim to prepare complete and accurate CBM forms.
- The course highlighted the difficulties of full commitment by participants to an online training course in comparison to an in-person workshop. Because of its nature, online training cannot benefit from the full attention of the participants due to simultaneous competing tasks. One solution to this challenge could be to provide enough lead time for participants before the start of the course, to prepare and team up at national level for training activities.
- With regard to course duration, 82% of participants believed that an online course should not be longer than one to two weeks. The organizers also acknowledge that an optimal course duration to achieve training objectives is two weeks (at least 10 working days).

- The course proved that the selection of a suitable online meeting platform significantly contributes to achievement of the training objectives. Furthermore, conducting short trial sessions for participants and instructors to check the reliability of their internet connection and clarity of audio and video helps to avoid any technical issues during the course. However, it is important to have contingency and continuity plans in place in case of technical issues.
- Finally, selection of convenient dates and timeslots for the live sessions which suit the participants' geographical distribution is another important practical concern.

VII. Way ahead

17. An in-person advanced course on national implementation for NCPs in Southeast Asia, as a follow-up event to the online training course, is planned once the situation allows the conduct of an international meeting in a safe manner. Japan has already provided funding to support such a workshop. Participants in the online course expressed their enthusiasm and willingness to participate in such a follow-up event and to build on the work accomplished. Further discussions will be conducted with the participants of the online training course to explore additional needs and identify topics for future training.

18. The information provided in this working paper is intended to encourage States Parties in other regions to consider organizing such online training courses on issues relating to the BWC, or to provide support to the ISU to enable it to organize similar courses. Japan strongly believes in the importance of empowering NCPs and providing them with the appropriate information and tools to fulfil their role under the Convention.
