EUROPEAN COMMISSION’S GREEN PAPER ON BIO-PREPAREDNESS

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Abstract: The importance of developing a “biological all-hazards approach” which takes into consideration all risks (terrorist attacks, other intentional releases, accidents or naturally occurring disease outbreaks) is stressed relevant to European Union. As a consequence the creation of the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) sought to strengthen prevention and improve handling of outbreaks of existing and emerging diseases and biological health threats across Europe. Besides a Green Paper on Bio-Preparedness was adopted by the European Commission in July 2007 which is aimed at exploring ways to complement the framework already in place which seeks to ensure security and prevent deliberate criminal acts.

Keywords: European Commission, European Centre for Disease Control, pandemic, safety, cooperation

1. Introduction

Terrorists target our security, the values of our democratic societies and the basic rights and freedoms of our citizens – as the bomb attacks in Madrid and London in recent years as well as other unsuccessful attempts have clearly shown.

Although terrorists have mainly used explosives or improvised explosive devices, there is a real possibility that in future they could turn to non-conventional means, such as biological weapons or materials. Some of these materials have the capacity to infect thousands of people, contaminate soil, buildings and transport infrastructures, destroy agriculture and infect animal populations. These could affect food and animal feed at any stage in the food supply chain. Whilst the risk of a bioterrorist attack has been statistically low, the consequences of such an attack could be devastating.
If a deliberate introduction of deadly pathogens or a naturally occurring disease outbreak were to occur in the European Union, or be imported from a third country, this could affect several Member States simultaneously, or spread across borders, having considerable economic and social impact.

2. All-hazards Approach

In our actions to prevent and deal effectively with potential attacks, we cannot focus solely on terrorism. The risks from dangerous biological materials and pathogens need to be reduced and preparedness enhanced through a “biological all-hazards approach” – generic preparedness within our overall crisis management capability. Such an approach takes into consideration all risks – terrorist attacks, other intentional releases, accidents or naturally occurring disease outbreaks.

3. Existing Instruments

A great deal of work has already been done to reduce the risks for EU citizens in the event of a bioterrorist attack or biological accident. Indeed, the European Union has developed structures which include instruments that have already proved effective in handling individual crises.

For instance, mechanisms are already in place for effective and rapid coordination in the event of human health crises, especially as regards agents carrying very serious threats, such as Anthrax, Botulism, Glanders, Haemorrhagic fever, Plague, Smallpox, Toxic syndromes or Tularemia.

Threats from the spread of communicable diseases have prompted the Commission to work to improve cooperation between the Member States. We have also developed systems and networks for disease prevention, early-warning and intervention.

The creation of the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC), based in Stockholm, sought to strengthen prevention and improve handling of outbreaks of existing and emerging diseases and biological health threats across Europe. We have also developed legislation covering animal and plant health pathogens, as well as control and prevention mechanisms to ensure food safety, including strict hygiene rules, measures to reduce the incidence of salmonella and other zoonoses, the setting of microbiological criteria and animal by-product legislation.

Moreover, farm animals in the EU (cattle, sheep and goats) are subject to identification systems, which serve as a powerful tool to react to the discovery of threats, deliberate or otherwise. This is of great value in helping to isolate and eradicate diseases once discovered.