

Col Ram Athavale examines multiagency response operations in CBRN incidents



CRDRRMC (Cordillera Regional Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council) Response Cluster and IATF-EID (Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases) members present their respective agency's COVID-19 Contingency plan during the CRDRRMC meeting at Manila, Philippines.

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It's my show!

It is widely recognised that the multi-agency response to a CBRN incident will be challenging. It will therefore require a dynamic and joint approach by the concerned emergency services and other agencies to deliver an operationally effective, optimal and synergised response

Toxic incidents are on the rise and there is a need to plan prevention and response measures with care. An incident – accident or terrorist attack – involving the use of CBRN materials, could inflict large numbers of casualties. The response to a CBRN incident begins with the victims and others in the vicinity: these are the actual first responders. They include bystanders, volunteers and local police personnel. Immediate actions to mitigate effects of the toxic release and measures to prevent casualties will result in fewer fatalities. Therefore, public awareness of what to do and what not to do in a CBRN incident is paramount.

Skilled first responders are the CBRN Response Teams, who reach the site after the alert is sounded and would depend on transportation, number of affected

KEY RESPONSE TASKS

- Detection, assessment, identification
- Personal protection
- Control of situation, isolation and escalation prevention
- Casualty management and evacuation
- Communication
- Site preservation
- Seek additional resources and specialist support

sites and distance from their location to the site. They would be trained and equipped for structured response actions

at the incident site.

Agencies such as police, counter terrorist units, fire department, civil defence, CBRN units, forensics, medics and paramedics, intelligence agencies, civic officials, municipal authorities, NGOs and volunteers would be swarming to do their bit. Each of these would be trying to work in its own vertical while contributing to (or otherwise) the effort on-site.

Operational interoperability

Operational interoperability can be expressed as the extent to which stakeholder agencies can work together coherently, through:

- Shared ethos – of what matters most
- Shared concepts and common doctrine – a common set of operating principals or guidance
- Unified command and clarity of who is in charge of what, when and where
- Compatible and reliable communication systems
- Shared language – to ensure common understanding in pressurised operating environments
- Common or compatible equipment



©South Korea National Fire Agency

No, Its mine

Above: 'All of Government Approach': inspectors in South Korea check a firefighting agency's COVID-19 preparedness.

Left: Firefighters with the Directorate of Emergency Services Fire Department participate in a scenario at the post railyard on 20 March 2019, for the Vigilant Triad 2019 exercise at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, USA.



©Sgt Karen Sampson, Fort McCoy Public Affairs Office

- Common standards of professional practice
- All of the above should be supported through continuous capability building by common training, mock exercises, consistent occupational competency and shared debriefing. Response to a CBRN incident is time critical and demands

special expertise. Contingency planning and sound logistics are needed to support the response plans. In this battle against CBRN threats, we need to be optimally prepared at all times.

Interagency operations

The above principles provide guidance

on the key aspects of any multi-agency response that is critical to saving life and ensuring the protection of emergency service personnel. They are founded on these overarching assumptions:

- The nature of a CBRN(e) event requires that Commanders from each emergency service co-locate at scene as a matter of urgency to streamline the decision-making process.
- Joint decision-making at scene requires an appropriate level of command at that location and should be achieved through the use of the Incident Command System in vogue.
- Agencies should identify, select and train personnel to carry out key command and support functions to enable effective decision making.

RESPONSE

Right: A response technician prepares to operate in a hazardous material suit that protects the wearer from liquid hazardous material. There are different suits for hazardous gas, liquid and a mix.

Below: Members of the Spokane fire department don personal protective equipment during a hazardous materials emergency response exercise in December 2014, at Fairchild Air Force Base, Washington, USA.



©Rudy Owens, Office of State Fire Marshal



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- The principles must be flexible enough to apply to variations in national, regional and local capabilities. The key factors for joint working are co-location, communication, co-ordination, joint understanding of risk, and shared situational awareness. The impact and response will vary depending upon the nature of the material and event.

Barriers to cooperation

While the aim is to work together in synergy to optimise operational efficiency, barriers to interagency cooperation centre on problems with communication, leadership, interagency rivalry, cultural and organisational differences, legal and structural differences, and lack of a common operating platform and training. These barriers can be overcome by legislating the Incident Command System (ICS) to:

- Post liaison officers from all stakeholders and response forces at the ICS
- Create common understanding of roles by developing a Common Operating Platform (COP)
- Conduct periodic briefings to update all at ICS
- Allow cross communication and CBRN expert networking
- Flexible Incident Command – phased transfer of command

- Incorporate stakeholders in planning stages
- Conduct table top exercises and mock drills.

Incident Command System (ICS)

Apart from lack of resources, lack of coordination among various agencies and an absence of role clarity amongst various stakeholders pose serious challenges. If the response is planned and the stakeholders are trained, there will be no scope for ad-hoc measures and the response will be smooth and effective. An Incident Command System must be recognised by all, and be government approved.

Exposure to CBRN agents represents an additional operational risk for first responders and law enforcement agencies. If a CBRN event is the result of a malevolent action, there are additional issues to be dealt with. Forensic investigation must be carried out to collect criminal evidence, confidential information and intelligence must be shared, and responders and the population as a whole provided with higher security standards.

The ICS is a flexible system and only required sections may be made operational as and when required. This system envisages that the roles and duties of various stakeholders are laid down in

advance and personnel earmarked and trained in their respective roles. The ICS also lays down the chain of command and interoperability among the stakeholder agencies during the response stages.

An unfolding situation

The lead agency role will change over time to reflect the changing circumstances of a major CBRN emergency. An incident may overwhelm the Incident Commander and Incident Response Team when more qualified and experienced senior officers arrive on scene. A jurisdictional or agency change in command could be operationally required, and turnover of personnel will increase during extended incidents. Ownership of leadership could be reviewed as the incident unfolds. Different departments or agencies may take the lead in a deliberate CBR release, with a common Deputy for organisational continuity.

Response to a CBRN incident is time critical and demands special expertise. CBRN response teams need to constantly upgrade their skills and knowledge. Contingency planning and sound logistics are needed to support the response plans. Interagency or multi-agency operations are critical to saving lives and need to be orchestrated with care and speed in a well-oiled, synergistic manner. To achieve this, agencies need to come together as one unit while retaining their specialisation and tasks to deliver optimal operational results. Easier said than done! ■

Col Ram Athavale has been a key adviser to the Government of India on National CBRN Security and to the EU CBRN Risk Mitigation Centres of Excellence initiative. His book Toxic Portents deals with CBRN incident management in India.



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