Social and Psychological Consequences of Chemical, Biological and Radiological Terrorism

NATO-Russia Advanced Research Workshop

A joint workshop took place at NATO Headquarters between the 25 and 27th March 2002, bringing together international experts from Russia, the NATO countries and other relevant nations to discuss the social and psychological implications of the new terrorism. The workshop generated interest, activity, enthusiasm and no shortage of questions that need to be addressed.

The Deputy Secretary General of NATO, Ambassador Alessandro Minuto Rizzo, attended the workshop's final session and gave a closing address.

The workshop was organised and co-chaired by Professor Valery Krasnov (Russia) and Professor Simon Wessely (UK), and it was opened by Mr. Jean Fournet, Assistant Secretary General for Scientific and Environmental Affairs.

A detailed summary of the proceedings of the workshop on Social and Psychological Consequences of Chemical, Biological and Radiological (CBR) Terrorism may be accessed here, and some of the themes presented in conclusion are given below:

- Most people involved in such episodes can be expected to cope. People are more resilient than we give them credit for. Except in certain circumstances, classic panic should not be anticipated.

- Although all those involved in a CBR episode can be expected to show emotional reactions, those who develop longer term psychiatric or psychological consequences will be the minority.

- In a modern technological society people will communicate immediately after any CBR episode. Authorities wishing to disseminate information on counter measures, decontamination, future risk and safe behaviours will need to do so very rapidly indeed.

- People should be encouraged to talk to people after an episode, since this may provide strong social cohesion, and promote cooperative behaviours.

- It may be that the best time for professional psychiatric interventions is not in the immediate aftermath of an attack, but in the following weeks, when people have stopped telling their own stories, but some,
those perhaps most distressed, still require empathic audiences.

- Authorities must understand the basic principles of risk communication.

- Communication depends upon the public trusting the person conveying the information. There is no consensus on who is the best person to deliver the necessary messages, and a probability that this will differ from nation to nation.

- Given the speed required, more work must be done preparing communication messages and strategies for possible CBR scenarios.

- Rumours, myths and legends will develop after any episode. These may serve a social purpose, but if there is a major failure in risk communication, these may in turn form the soil from which post exposure unexplained syndromes develop.

- Monitoring and surveillance of those involved in a CBR episode will be necessary. This will detect the emergence of later medical problems such as cancer or premature death, but also serve as an important public reassurance if no such increases are noted. During an acute episode it will be an imperative to document those affected, and an early priority to establish an appropriate control group.

- Maintaining public confidence is a long, and not just a short, term task. The recent events post Sept 11th have demonstrated that populations are resilient, and may react to assaults with cohesion rather than panic, even if many individuals will experience some psychological distress. Increased communication opportunities, especially those that are initiated by the public themselves, may add further protection against anxiety and distress.

- On the other hand, the nature of modern societies can also amplify the impact of terrorism. The same easy communications provides opportunities for the propagation of myth and rumour. Discrepancies between government statements, and between scientific experts, can be easily exploited. Access to the media of maverick scientific opinions will reduce confidence. Memories of previous accepted misgovernance reduce confidence, and create societies in which rumours of conspiracy and cover-up can flourish.

- The role of precaution in determining policy remains controversial. At the workshop views were expressed that only by showing caution and minimising risk would the public feel protected against the consequences of CBW. On the other hand, excessive caution can induce not resilience, but anxiety, perpetuating a cycle of increasing risk aversion and increasing anxiety. There is no consensus yet on how, or indeed if, the precautionary principle should operate after a serious CBR attack.

**Summary Conclusions**

Most societies vulnerable to CBR terrorism now have well developed disaster management plans in place. Whilst no plan will cover all eventualities, and few plans survive "contact with the enemy", it is still expected that rational planning will reduce acute casualties, reduce the possibility of panic, and provide populations with reassurance. Likewise, the repeated demonstrations of popular resilience and coping, and of people making their own solutions, gives grounds for optimism that societies are well equipped to resist the acute effects of mass terror.

On the other hand, the Workshop concluded that in the longer term, there was less reason for optimism. More research is needed on maintaining long term confidence and trust.