



# Exercise Iridium 1

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# Summary Report

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## **1.0 Introduction**

The 2011 series of European Commission (EC) chemical exercises (Exercise Iridium) is an initiative of the ECs Directorate General for Health and Consumers (DG SANCO) designed to provide Member States (MS) and other interested organisations, with an opportunity to review and practise their national response plans to deal with chemical incidents.

Each exercise in the series is regional, involving MS from an area in the EU as well as supporting EU Agencies; and is preceded by a communications cascade task. Exercise Iridium 1 is the first exercise in the series and was held from 16-17 March 2011 in Luxembourg.

## **2.0 Exercise Iridium 1 aim**

The aim of Exercise Iridium 1:

- To examine how public health and clinical personnel recognise, detect and alert EU stakeholders regarding a chemical incident and its impact

## **3.0 Exercise Iridium 1 objectives**

The objectives for Exercise Iridium 1:

- To identify the criteria for detection and identification of chemical incidents, and recognise triggers for incidents that are of cross-border relevance between MS
- To examine the processes for detection of a chemical agent on exposed individuals following an incident
- To understand the framework for EU reporting and notification by MS, EU Agencies and WHO for an actual or potential chemical incident
- To examine the processes of inter-sectoral collaboration and coordination between MS
- To explore the use of CARRA-NET and RAS CHEM

## **4.0 Participants**

The scenario for Exercise Iridium 1 was based in northern Europe and the following MS each sent one delegate to exercise:

- Finland
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Norway

The European Chemical Agency (ECHA) and the European Maritime Agency (EMSA) also provided one delegate each. DG SANCO had two delegates attending the exercise. Sweden, Estonia, Denmark, Iceland and WHO were also invited to attend but were unable to send delegates.

## **5.0 Exercise Iridium 1 format**

A simple communications cascade task preceded Exercise Iridium 1 on the morning of 15 March (see section 7.0 below).

Exercise Iridium 1 took place over two days – the afternoon of 16 March (phase one) and the morning of 17 March (phase two). Delegates were seated at separate tables as if they were working in their own MS or organisation. When an audioconference was requested during exercise play, delegates met around a single table to facilitate the meeting.

During the exercise some information was passed to delegates that would not normally be seen by them during a crisis, or in the build-up to an event. This was done to enable the exercise and scenario to develop over a short period of time.

## 6.0 Exercise Iridium 1 content

### 6.1 Scenario summary

The scenario developed and used for Exercise Iridium 1:

A ferry carrying passengers and mixed cargo leaves Helsinki, Finland on a routine sailing to Tallinn, Estonia. During loading, one of the containers is punctured, resulting in leakage of hydrofluoric acid on the ferry. The passengers and ship workers come into contact with the chemical and subsequently travel on to their destinations. Many become ill and present at hospital with unusual and non-specific symptoms. Contacts of the passengers also develop symptoms, including severe pain that is not controlled with opiates. Patients appear across many countries both EU and non-EU.

### 6.2 Inject summary

Injects used in phase one of the exercise focussed on the uncertainty of early events during the initial stages of an incident and provided summary patient information across MS. Injects used in phase two looked at the strategy for managing the crisis in the early stages, finishing with a look forward to ongoing incident management.

## 7.0 Communications cascade

### 7.1 Aim

The aim is to conduct a simple communication cascade to review established public health communications channels for a chemical incident across the EU27, EFTA countries, the EC, relevant EU Agencies and WHO.

### 7.2 Objective

The objective of the communications cascade is to review communications channels including –

- How you receive information
- Who you contact
- How you disseminate information
- The response you make to a received message

### 7.3 Output

A short message was sent from the Health Protection Agency (HPA) simulating a MS to DG SANCO regarding an event of public health concern. The message used in this task was not related to the content of Exercise Iridium 1.

The flow of information during the cascade can be seen in the table below –

Time (CET)	Action
09:05	HPA Excon send simulated message to DG SANCO
09:12	DG SANCO acknowledge receipt of e-mail
09:27	DG SANCO request secretariat to distribute the e-mail to the HSC Members and CBRN section and cc'ed to hierarchy
09:39	DG SANCO secretariat send message out.
09:43	Latvia respond (second contact 09:59)
09:47	Lithuania CBRN respond (HSC contact 10:33)
09:53	Norway respond (second contact 11:40)

10:07	Finland HSC alternate respond (HSC contact 11:47)
11:33	HPA Excon send Endex message to DG SANCO who then send to MS
14:14	Countries still acknowledging receipt of e-mail

All pre-warned MS acknowledged the message within 30 minutes. In total there were 25 responses in two hours from 17 MS and one from DG SANCO.

MS participating in Exercise Iridium 1 were sent a feedback form with a number of questions regarding the key responses for improvement of notification of a public health incident. The key points from the responses are:

- That e-mails should go to 24/7 'functional' mail boxes to enable whoever is on call to access the email.
- Shorter instructions are required. The phone number to call or the e-mail contact in DG SANCO should appear at the top of the page.

One point noted from the HPA control staff monitoring responses during the cascade was that a number of MS HSC and CBRN members used the "Reply to All" email facility. This caused unnecessary email traffic to all members on the distribution list. Consideration should be given to reminding people of email etiquette, and when it is appropriate to use the "Reply to All" function.

## 8.0 Key points from Exercise Iridium 1

The exercise ran according to schedule with full and enthusiastic participation from the delegates. This enabled a number of key points to be identified during the exercise.

In the initial uncertainty stages of the exercise, it became apparent that no mechanism currently exists within the EC to provide an early risk assessment for chemical incidents. There is not an EU network or agency currently mandated to provide the necessary threat assessment for the early stages of a chemical incident. A comparable agency and network exists for communicable disease through ECDC.

It also became apparent during the exercise that there is no mechanism currently in place to trigger an alert or provide notification to MS and DG SANCO regarding a developing chemical incident. Some MS reported that they do not think the EU is effective in detecting chemical incidents of cross-border significance. The RAS CHEM tool currently under development is intended as an information sharing platform rather than an official alerting tool. Clearly defined protocols for the use of RAS CHEM will be needed to ensure that its role remains clear. Several MS reported that they would also consider using RAS BICHAT if there is any suspicion that the incident is a deliberate release. Uncertainty about whether to use RAS CHEM or RAS BICHAT in the early unfolding stages of an incident may result in postings being missed by MS. Careful guidance about when and which chemical reporting tool to use are likely to be needed when RAS CHEM becomes an operational tool.

The exercise highlighted that there is currently no existing mechanism for the development of an EU case definition for containment in relation to a chemical incident. Whilst the process is well defined for incidents involving communicable disease, it is not for incidents involving chemicals. Further work in this area is required to define the process and outline the responsibility for development of a case definition for incidents that are not communicable disease in origin.

The exercise identified that there are currently no European standard operating procedures for use during a chemical incident. This also includes a lack of regulations or legislation for public health input for chemical incident. The Chemical and Radiation Risk Assessment

Network (CARRA NET) is being developed and it is hoped that they will provide a set of protocols to follow in the case of chemical incidents.

During the exercise it became apparent that overarching coordination processes for a chemical incident within the EU require further clarification. To some extent the introduction of the CARRA NET procedures will assist with this, however clarity about who facilitates and leads on the public health response to an incident at an EU level should be clearly defined. The exercise involved a number of EU and non-EU citizens, and whilst reporting under IHR was mentioned by all MS, clear lines of reporting and coordination need to be outlined for EU MS.

ECHA participated in the exercise and reported that they currently do not have the capacity to act in emergencies as this is not part of their mandate. However they do have the ability to provide support if requested but this needs further discussion to establish the extent of assistance available. ECHA suggested that they may benefit from being connected to an early warning or alerting network for chemical incidents such as RAS CHEM, enabling them to be aware and to possibly expect enquiries from MS and the media during a chemical incident.

EMSA also participated in the exercise, but in a reduced capacity as the scenario was not able to fully engage them. However they report that it would be beneficial to set up contact between EMSA and DG SANCO, and could provide advice or back-room support to DG SANCO during a shipping incident, for issues such as ship movement.

During the feedback at the end of the exercise, the delegates all expressed the need to have at least two delegates from their MS attend the exercise to assist with discussions. It was felt that this would enhance input and learning during the exercise. Ideally a risk assessor and a risk manager would be beneficial from each participating MS.

## **9.0 Next steps**

The next steps in the Iridium series of exercises are:

- Exercise Iridium 2 (29 and 30 June) and Exercise Iridium 3 (13 and 14 September) are scheduled to take place in Budapest and Brussels / Luxembourg respectively.
- Further development of the RAS CHEM and CARRA-NET programmes so they can be used by delegates in Exercises Iridium 2 and 3.
- Consideration needs to be given to the possibility of two delegates per MS attending the exercise, however this will have financial implications for MS and the Commission
- The communications cascade will be initiated to all MS (HSC and CBRN members), but focus on the delegates attending the following exercise.
- This summary report will form part of the final report due for completion following Exercise Iridium 3.

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