

## INTERPOL Asian Bioterrorism Workshop

Keynote address by Associate Professor Ho Peng Kee, Singaporean Senior Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs  
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*Mr Ronald Noble, INTERPOL Secretary General,  
Commissioner of Police,  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and gentlemen,*

Good morning.

### **Terrorism - an evolving threat**

It is common wisdom that terrorism is not something new. The word 'terrorism' entered the European languages as far back as 1789, in the wake of the French Revolution. Over the centuries, acts of terrorism have undergone fateful transformations. This evolution is still ongoing.

Apart from executing traditional terrorist acts such as bombings, kidnaps and hijacks, terrorists are increasingly starting to experiment with new forms of terrorist acts. Bioterrorism, or the act of using biological agents in attacks, is one which brings terrorism into a whole new arena of spreading terror.

### **Threat of bioterrorism**

Unlike other forms of terrorist acts, where the impact can be felt almost instantaneously in the aftermath of an attack, we may not realise that a biological attack has occurred until perhaps days or even weeks later. By that time, the terrorist may already have fled the country or succumbed to the biological agent, and all the valuable investigative leads may have disappeared.

Also, unlike a conventional terrorist attack in which the impact area is more likely to be localised, the after-effects of a bioterrorist attack may be far more widespread; indeed, in this age of easy air travel, may even transcend borders and impact countries in different continents.

### **International co-operation is needed to combat bioterrorism**

We cannot therefore afford not to work together to contain the threat of bioterrorism together. Countries need to reach out to one another; increase their level of cooperation and exchange of information. When combating or containing the spread of infection, time is of the essence. We must move and act fast.

To achieve the required speed of response when a bioterrorist attack hits, countries must start work now. Networks must be established and strengthened in times of normalcy so that we are resilient enough to confront and overcome crises. Agencies must not restrict themselves to only networking with their counterparts in other countries. We must also expand our networks to include international agencies such as WHO and INTERPOL so as to be able to tap the tremendous expertise that they can offer.

I am heartened to note that agencies in Singapore are conscious of the need to establish strong ties with their counterparts. Our agencies have also established strong ties with agencies in other countries, ties which have served us well on many occasions in the past. The Singapore Police Force's close co-operation with their regional counterparts has resulted in the solving of numerous cross-border crimes, as well as ensuring the swift apprehension of perpetrators who had escaped across borders after committing crimes.

Although these are commendable achievements, we cannot be complacent and rest on our laurels. We must constantly seek to expand these efforts to enhance our international networks. The presence of so many experts in the field of bioterrorism with diverse backgrounds provides a wonderful opportunity for developing such networks.

### **What Singapore is doing**

While international co-operation is important, each country must also build its own internal capabilities. Indeed, Singapore has been studying the threat of bioterrorism seriously the last few years. We recognise that our agencies cannot shy away from this threat and remain in their comfort zone of dealing with conventional threats. As a responsible member of the international community, we have a role to play in neutralising this threat as well. To this end, from a near zero-based knowledge in this field, we quickly set out to acquire relevant knowledge through regular exchanges with various agencies and experts. Our strategic response agencies include the key homefront security and safety agencies, health authorities, and also the local scientific community, many of whom, I am happy to note, are here with us today.

Though we still have a lot to learn, we have certainly made progress. Our effective response to the SARS episode in 2003 taught us many valuable lessons, lessons which can be applied to how we deal with bioterrorist attacks. For example, we know that when faced with a largely unknown threat, the community at large would be fearful; and rumours will abound. This is where confidence-building measures such as temperature screening and public education, as well as ring-fencing measures such as home quarantine, proved to be effective in ensuring that our communities were able to carry on their normal activities.

Another valuable lesson was that Singapore succeeded in overcoming SARS through the efforts and co-operation of not only the various government agencies, but through the determination and support of the community at large as well. We learnt that it is easier to galvanise the community when they know what to do – so public education and judicious sharing of information with the public at the right time is critical. The authorities must therefore strive to be prompt in updating, informing and guiding the public about the developments in any crisis situation. However, a balance needs to be struck to ensure that the public is not alarmed unduly, causing unnecessary panic and alarm. This is another area that countries can learn from and share experiences with one another.

### **Concluding remarks**

Once again, let me say that I am glad to see such a wide representation of participants today. I am sure that you will reap benefits and insights from the sharing and exchanges with one another. I wish you all a fruitful discussion.

Thank you.