COOPERATION WITH FOREIGN MISSIONS IN AUSTRIA: CASE STUDY “ANTHRAX”

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I. Introduction

1. Soon after the first cases of ANTHRAX in the USA (autumn 2001), AUSTRIA, as many other states, was affected by similar incidents. As it was a new situation for Austria, it required the integration of various task forces without having prior experience in this field. The contact with and treatment of pathogenic microorganisms in general (and biologic weapons in special) is regulated by different federal laws and regulations.

II. Civil Protection in AUSTRIA

2. Civil Protection is the summary of all the precautions taken, which should enable the population to survive difficult and dangerous situations of any kind. It is defined by the Civil National Defence, one of the four pillars of the Austrian National Defence, and requires precautions by:

   • authorities and
   • task forces, as well as
   • all the citizens in their private surroundings.

3. AUSTRIA is divided into nine political provinces. Apart from special scenarios such as radiation protection, which is the responsibility of the federal government, Civil Protection is the responsibility of each single province.

4. In the largest province of LOWER-AUSTRIA for example, the legal basis for emergency relief and emergency precautions can be found in the Lower-Austrian Emergency Relief Act. The provinces are assisted by the different institutions of the federal crisis management, especially the Federal Warning Agency, which is an institution of the Ministry of Interior (MOI).
III. Responsibilities of the Austrian Armed Forces (AAF) within the Civil Protection

5. According to the Federal Defence Act §2, all federal institutions as well as institutions and organizations of the provinces and municipalities have the authority to request the assistance of the AAF within their respective area of responsibility. The affected units will in any case work under the authority of the requesting institution (Assistance).

6. The NBC-Defence of the AAF covers all measures necessary to minimize the NBC-threat before, during and after the use of NBC-weapons and after the release of toxic industrial materials (TIM) when conducting military operations as well as disaster relief operations.

7. In combination with intensive training of soldiers, the applied procedures and the equipment in use for detection and identification of NBC-weapons and hazardous substances and for the decontamination of persons and buildings help to cope with NBC-threats of different sources. Therefore, the NBC-Defence of the AAF was the unit called for assistance by the MOI after the first appearance of ANTHRAX in AUSTRIA, October 2001.

IV. Chronology of the ANTHRAX-alerts

8. Oct. 4th, 2001: Soon after the first cases of suspicious substances were reported in AUSTRIA, a well-organized cooperation between the police/MOI, the Health Authorities and the AAF was initiated. After putting in place a headquarters at the NBC-Defence School, an NBC-Ready Reaction Team was deployed in the area of VIENNA, where most of the alerts took place. This team was a joint detection and decontamination element which should, once called for assistance, do the first assessment of the scene, take samples of the substance found and decontaminate persons, items and premises.

9. Oct. 13th, 2001: The whole NBC-Defence of the AAF was set on alert in order to assist the authorities to cope with the increasing number of ANTHRAX-alerts.

10. Oct. 4th – Dec. 5th, 2001: Coordination of all military involvement by the MOD and through the NBC-Defence School in close coordination with the MOI (see Annex A: „HOT PHASE“). In each of the cases a Senior Consultant of the provincial Health Authorities was present and responsible for the requirements of epidemic-, hygiene- and health-regulations. The samples of the suspicious substances were at this point analysed by a laboratory of the AAF, in a later phase this task was handed over to three authorized laboratories of the Ministry of Social Security and Generations (MsSG) in MOEDLING, GRAZ and INNSBRUCK (see Annex B: “ROUTINE PHASE“) in order to cover the whole area of AUSTRIA.


Shortly after Sept. 11th first contacts were established between the MOI, NBC-Defense experts of the AAF and representatives of the American Embassy in order to coordinate the responses to possible attacks against American institutions in Austria. As the diplomatic mail of the US-Embassy came from the ANTHRAX-hit post office in WASHINGTON/DC, a contamination of the post offices at the embassy in VIENNA could not be excluded. Therefore these post offices have been closed and sealed off.

12. Consequently the authorities of the American Embassy inquired the MOI for assistance. Which requested the MOD for assistance to decontaminate the post offices at the embassy by
specialists of the NBC-Defence. During their presence at the embassy air-, material- and wiping-samples were taken and analysed. In one of the mailbags small amounts of ANTHRAX spores could be detected. The analysis of the different samples took one week, no further contamination could be detected.

13. The following problems appeared:

- Decontamination of persons and premises.
- Decontamination was conducted as much as possible with the usual military decontamination chemicals (use of the commercial products „Biotensid“ and „Dodekan“ only as a substitute).

14. Dec. 5th, 2001: after the initial phase of the ANTHRAX-alerts the control was handed over from the MOD/AAF level to the headquarters of the provincial Military Commands (see Annex B: “ROUTINE PHASE”). At this stage, 315 alerts occurred. The responsibility of each alert stayed with the Senior Consultant of the Provincial Health Authorities/MsSG and the command with the local police/MOI.

15. In total, the specialists of the Austrian NBC-Defence have been called about 500 times for assistance.

V. Lessons Learned

- Decontamination of persons and premises has to be improved and appropriate tests have to be conducted.
- Central command during the initial “HOT-PHASE”, (see Annex A) is essential.
- Hand-over of the responsibility to the territorial commands of the different provinces in the second “ROUTINE-PHASE”.
- Specialists of the AAF stay under the command of the local police/MOI (see Annex B).
- Coordinating work between the three ministries concerned must be intensified.
- Preparations of the experts concerned must be intensified for future scenarios.
- Training of and coordination with persons likely to be hit by future scenarios should be increased.
Annex 1

ANTHRAX ALERTS

“HOT PHASE”

SUSPICIOUS SUBSTANCE reported to

LABORATORY MOD
Results

PROV. SENIOR CONSULTANT MsSG

NBC-READY REACTION TEAM MOD

LOCAL POLICE / MOI operational command

NBC DEFENCE SCHOOL operational control

DUTY OFFICER MOD

SECURITY DIRECTION MOI

REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE
Annex 2

ANTHRAX ALERTS

“ROUTINE PHASE”

SUSPICIOUS SUBSTANCE
reported to

LABORATORIES
MsSG
Results

PROV. SENIOR
CONSULTANT
MsSG

PROVINCIAL
NBC-READY REACTION TEAM
MOD

LOCAL POLICE / MOI
operational command

PROV. MIL. COMMAND
MOD
operational control

PROVINCIAL
SECURITY DIRECTION
MOI

REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE

NBC DEFENCE SCHOOL
MOD / AAF
professional assistance