CHEMICAL WEAPONS AWARENESS
AND
DOCUMENTATION TRAINING

GAZIANTEP, TURKEY
7-12 OCTOBER 2013

COURSE REPORT: ASSESSMENT AND LESSONS LEARNED

WITH THE SUPPORT OF
1. BACKGROUND AND MANDATE

The Chemical Weapons Awareness and Documentation Training was organised by No Peace Without Justice (NPWJ) in partnership with the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), the Violations Documentation Center (VDC) and the Global Political Trends Center and with the support of the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The training took place from 7-12 October 2013 in the city of Gaziantep, where a number of international NGOs and international organisations have been based since the start of the Syrian crisis.

The training aimed to introduce participants to all relevant issues linked to the use of chemical weapons: the nature and basic characteristics of different chemical weapons; signs and symptoms associated with their use; the legal framework on international humanitarian, human rights and criminal law; responsive techniques and strategies; documentation; and advocacy efforts. An in-depth analysis of these aspects was provided by five expert trainers, followed by interactive discussions and workshops. Participants had been selected by ACU and VDC on the basis of their legal, medical and/or activist backgrounds. To ensure appropriate follow-up to the course, participants discussed concrete strategies on the effects and responses to chemical weapons, as well as on the investigation and follow-up to crimes related to chemical weapons.

This five-day training course is the first in the framework of No Peace Without Justice’s Syria Transitional Justice project. The project is aimed at assisting existing and nascent civil society organisations and networks to contribute most effectively to Syrian transitional justice documentation and policy discussions, which will in turn help shape the future of their country towards institutions that embrace principles of democracy and pluralism and that offer redress and accountability for human rights violations and promote reconciliation. It does so in part through information sharing and training and in part through capacity building among Syrian civil society actors to receive and coordinate external assistance, especially on transitional justice and accountability issues.

The long-term goal of this project is to promote democracy and human rights protection through incorporating transitional justice and accountability in decision-making on conflict resolution and stability, development, and reconstruction planning in Syria.

The project’s strategic objective is to support Syrian society’s active involvement in transitional justice and accountability issues, including advocacy and documenting human rights violations through receiving, gathering, collecting, collating, processing and securely storing information, documentation and materials. Their analysis must serve the purpose of establishing what happened and reconstructing those decision-making processes that resulted in violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in Syria since March 2011.

2. Course Summary

2.a. Participation

The Chemical Weapon Awareness and Documentation Training was attended by 23 participants and between two and four visitors per day, all of whom have different and relevant experience in the field. Participants included representatives from the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), the Violations Documentation Center (VDC) and representatives of informal associations and NGOs working inside Syria, including the Free Syrian Lawyers Union, the Syrian Commission for Justice and Accountability and Women for Peace. Participants also included judges, doctors and medical personnel active in field hospitals. Several geographical regions were represented, with representatives of Syrian NGOs and informal groups from the Northern regions of Aleppo (Aleppo city and countryside), al-Raqq city, Deir Ezzor and from the Southern region of Damascus.
During the first day of the training representatives of international organisations and NGOs, namely European Union External Action (EEAS) and The Day After, also attended the sessions as observers. Furthermore, the training sessions hosted also the opening remarks of the Vice President of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and President of the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), Ms Suheir Atassi; and a speech from and discussion with the Prime Minister of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, Mr Ahmat Tumeh.

2.b. Trainers

The trainers for the Training Course were identified by NPWJ and consisted of experts in each of the specialised areas addressed by the course. They came from a variety of institutions including the University of Leeds (UK), SecureBio Ltd, the Italian army and NPWJ itself.

2.c. Training program

The content and format of the Training Course curriculum was developed by NPWJ in co-operation with the Justice Coordination Officer of the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU). The final program is attached to this report and shows the full range of topics covered by the Training Course.

The Chemical Weapons Awareness and Documentation Training opened with an introduction to the concept of chemical weapons and the background of its development from different points of view linked to military, medical and legal issues. The session on “General overview on Chemical weapons”, presented by General Salvatore Carrara and Dr Alastair Hay, tackled the questions: “What are chemical weapons?” and “When, how, why are chemical weapons used?”. It provided a first general overview on the different kinds of devices, to familiarise all participants with the basic nature of chemical weapons and understand when, how and why chemical weapons may be, or may have been, used. They were also able to explain and discuss this subject with the presenters.

Day One continued with a session dedicated to the International Legal Framework on chemical weapons, presented by Dr Niccolò Figà-Talamanca and Ms Alison Smith, respectively NPWJ’s Secretary-General and International Criminal Justice Director. This session provided a common baseline understanding of the international legal framework on chemical weapons, including insight into the set-up of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and International Law, Human Rights and the Rule of Law. The morning activities of the first day of sessions served to ensure a baseline of knowledge about those topics among all participants, including those whose primary areas of expertise lie elsewhere. After these general introductions, the following presentations and workshops by Dr Hay and General Carrara deepened the content of session one, by providing an overview of different chemical agents, as well as methods for their delivery and dissemination, considering the specific effects of exposure to mustard gas, nerve agents and riot control agents.

Day Two began with a session led by General Carrara and Dr Hay on the “Effects of chemical weapons”, focusing on medical aspects: highlighting symptoms; and talking about the proper medical responses and counter measures to be adopted. The trainers also underlined the impact of long-term effects and the need to collect data. The participants worked in groups and shared their experiences, considering those experiences in light of the information received in the previous session and concluding by underlining best practices in case of a chemical weapon attack.

The first session in the afternoon was devoted to the visit of the Prime Minister of the National Coalition for the Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, Mr Ahmat Tumeh. The Prime Minister asked each participant to introduce her or himself, which provided an important opportunity for the representatives of Syrian civil society to deliver their messages directly to the highest representative of the Syrian Coalition and to express their concerns and criticism regarding the situation inside the country. The Prime Minister answered the participants’ questions, focusing on the situation on the
ground, pointing to security as a top priority for the new Syrian institutions in order to maintain the control of the liberated areas and to ensure the safety of the citizens. The Prime Minister also underlined how the study and creation of a new legislative framework is one of the most urgent needs in order to save the Syrian social fabric, avoiding sectarian divisions and fighting against the Baath strategy of “divide and conquer”. After his speech, Dr Figà-Talamanca, Secretary-General of NPWJ, stressed the importance of accountability and transitional justice in order to keep hope alive and avoid the cycle of violence in a conflict situation. Following this important meeting, the training continued with a working group session in which the participants divided into four groups and discussed documentation procedures according to their own way of working on the ground.

Day Three started with a session on “Documentation of the use or existence of chemical weapons”. The session was presented by Dr Alastair Hay and Ms Alison Smith. Main topics included documenting allegations of chemical weapons incidents; considering previous cases of chemical weapons use; information management and analysis, in particular dealing with documentary information; and preparing reports based on the information gathered. The trainers introduced and tackled the issues of conflict mapping and witness interviews as an effective way to put together the story of the crime for legal purposes.

The second session of the day, entitled “Environmental and biological samples”, by Dr Alastair Hay and Ms Alison Smith introduced participants to the basic principles of collecting, transporting and storing samples. The question “how to collect samples” was tackled directly by Dr Hay: with a practical and interactive demonstration, he explained how people can effectively collect samples in order to present them as evidence with basic materials available in every-day life: jars, plastic bags and spoons. These best practices and lessons learned in Dr Hay’s direct experience in the field as a chemical weapons expert gave trainees essential and practical guidelines in order to be operative on the ground. Dr Hay also spoke about the chain of custody and explained the need for clear and transparent treatment and conservation of the samples. In the end of the session, participants were provided with the means to handle evidence that might be encountered and were equipped with the description of means to avoid the contamination of evidence through collection procedures.

After the lunch break, Mr Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, Dr Alastair Hay and General Salvatore Carrara discussed “Risk Awareness and Risk Management on chemical weapons”, deepening the topics related to principles of risk management, giving examples of protective measures, medical responses and counter measures and providing general guidelines for responding to a chemical weapons incident. The introduction to this session was made by Doctor Al-Jabal (a participant doctor working in a field hospital in Aleppo city). Doctor Al-Jabal, in charge of the NBCR division (Nuclear, Biological, Chemical and Radiological Division), showed a video of a simulation activity (chemical weapons drill) made to prepare and disseminate the skills necessary to respond in the best possible way to a chemical weapons attack. The video is not limited to strictly medical behaviour, but also tackles issues of general awareness, decontamination, documentation, hospital organisation and logistics, protective clothing and the correct management of people’s reactions, following the US protocols. Thanks to this introduction, the rest of the daily sessions were not only devoted to the presentations, but also to a comparison of best practices and lessons learned based on the previous experiences of the participants. Everyone had the chance to talk together, discussing not only theoretical advice but also practical guidelines for the correct management of field hospitals and rescue in case of a mass chemical weapons incident.

In the evening, an informal meeting was held to move the focus from the technical point of view to a political discussion on the issue of chemical weapons in Syria. The specifics of the discussion included a consideration of the decommissioning of the Syrian chemical weapons stockpiles once the Syrian Republic becomes a State Party to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction (Chemical Weapons Convention) on 14 October 2013. The different positions among the participants emerged clearly in the discussion:
the idea of decommissioning the chemical weapons, supported by the international community together with the Regime of President Bashar al-Assad, creates doubts among Syrian activists. For some of them, it is not clear enough whether this process will legitimize a criminal regime and will ensure its existence, or effectively destroy a threat that could hit the Syrian population again. Moreover, there is no common position between those who consider these weapons as a strategic and necessary tool in the balance of power against the State of Israel.

Day Four began with a presentation of Case Studies by Dr Figà-Talamanca. Starting from Dr Figà-Talamanca and Ms Smith’s experiences in investigating crimes under international law in Kenya, Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, the participants received examples of investigative techniques and reporting procedures. Dr Figà-Talamanca and Ms Smith addressed issues related to witness interviews and crosschecking of data in order to obtain accurate information.

The second part of the session was dedicated to a workshop activity focused on different kinds of information and the different sources and samples needed in an investigation. During the discussion, presenters drew attention to essential elements of international criminal law, pointing to the different modes of liability before international courts and tribunals. The presenters introduced common standards for taking statements from victims and witnesses and opened a broader discussion on the ways in which investigating teams might gather information on the ground.

The end of the day was reserved for an in-depth discussion tackling the decommissioning of Syria’s chemical weapons stockpiles. Presenters and participants engaged in discussion based on a previous pros/cons workshop session to clarify the different points of view in this crucial and current topic.

The morning sessions of Day Five started with a session led by Dr Figà-Talamanca and Ms Smith. The session highlighted in detail modes of liability for establishing criminal responsibility, focusing on the different ways in which individuals may be held accountable under international criminal law. The session presented an overview of how the identification of orders, command structures and weaponry can be used in determining responsibility for crimes under international law. The main aim of the session was to familiarise participants with the various theories of direct and command responsibility, including “Joint Criminal Enterprise”, and develop a common understanding of the different ways in which individuals may bear responsibility for the commission of crimes related to chemical weapons.

The course closed with de-briefings on the course content. Participants, observers and presenters provided their assessment and comments on the course content and structure. Additional feedback was provided through the course evaluation forms (delivered focusing on the specific activities of each day on a daily basis and focusing on the general evaluation of the training in the last day), and through in-person debriefings with observers and presenters during the whole training. A certificate of attendance was given to all course participants at the conclusion of the course.

3. Assessment and Recommendations

This five-day training course is part of an NPWJ project aimed at assisting existing and nascent civil society organisations and networks to contribute most effectively to Syrian transitional justice documentation and policy discussions, which will in turn help shape the future of their country towards institutions that embrace principles of democracy and pluralism and that offer redress and accountability for human rights violations and promote reconciliation. It does so in part through information sharing and training and in part through capacity building among Syrian civil society actors to receive and coordinate external assistance, especially on transitional justice and accountability issues.

After the 21 August 2013 chemical attack in Damascus suburb of Ghouta, most of NPWJ’s Syrian partner organisations underlined the need for a training focused on this issue. The purpose of the training would be, on the one hand, to answer to a growing feeling of fear among the population by providing basic information about chemical weapons and how to respond to an attack. On the other
hand, the purpose would be to offer specific training and skills to activists and medical personnel working on the field of documentation, considering that the long-term goal of this project is to promote democracy and human rights protection through the development of transitional justice and accountability, breaking the expectation of impunity and rewards for violence, as main bases of the reconstruction of new Syria institutional framework.

Another primary purpose of the Training Course was to enlarge NPWJ networking with Syrian NGOs and Syrian institutions and extend the possible beneficiaries base and partners. Participants were debriefed regularly throughout the course through daily and general evaluation forms.

Participants agreed that the course had given a good overview of the issues and the course also generally struck the right balance between imparting information and taking advantage of the pre-existing expertise of the participants during the workshop sessions and the debates. The Training Course is the first activity of the project and, as such, is the starting point of a process of strengthening relations among the participants and NPWJ’s Syria team and supporting the documentation process already ongoing on the ground.

There were, as anticipated, lessons to be learned in terms of what, if implemented, will strengthen future training programs in terms of their participation, role of presenters and content and structure of the course program.

3.a. Participation

All participants had a good general level of knowledge of the topic of chemical weapons in the different fields tackled during the training: international legal context, medical practice and documentation, also considering the different professional backgrounds of the participants. The main challenge of the training was to keep everybody on the same path, in order to build a common level of basic knowledge that everyone could also deepen considering their own areas of specialisation.

One of the main successes of the training was the active participation and interaction with the presenters using workshops and discussion moments in addition to the informal meetings during coffee breaks and meals. This positive experience of interaction between participants and presenters was particularly appreciated by the participants, who could express their ideas and doubts in more depth. To increase and facilitate the relations among participants, there should be more clear guidelines ensuring a correct management of security issues (public use of names and possibility to record or take pictures) and to ensure they are comfortable with the content (especially considering eventual political discussions). For the next training, NPWJ team should elaborate guidelines on these topics.

In this first training, among the 23 participants, only two were women. NPWJ should support wider participation by women and promote the active role of women within the society.

Recommendations:

− Regional diversity could be broadened through intensified relations with Local Councils and other NGOs or informal organisations operating inside Syria.
− Ensure and support a wider participation of women.
− Develop further guidelines to guarantee correct behaviour in dealing with security issues (names, pictures).
− Increase the chances for political and open discussions on topics raised during the training.

3.b. Presenters

The presenters at the Training Course were of the highest quality considering the issues treated. They were able to make extremely valuable contributions because they became very familiar with the participants and were thus able to adapt their modules to accommodate the areas and levels of
expertise of the group. The briefing meeting among the NPWJ team and presenters ensured the chance to discuss and harmonise the presentations and to have a first discussion on the topics to be addressed during the training. The active methods that most of the presenters adopted was very appreciated by participants, who had the chance to engage directly on the topics based on their experiences.

Having the detailed agenda and training materials available in Arabic made the training course more effective and give the possibility to participants to disseminate the information.

The relation among presenters and participants was facilitated thanks to the great work of the simultaneous interpreters.

Recommendations:

- Content program and all training materials should be ready at least one week before to allow translators to have enough time to prepare it and for staff to organise the files for participants.
- For future training courses, presenters should arrive at the venue at least 24 hours before the training to ensure a better coordination on topics and logistic;
- For future training courses, every effort should be made to engage presenters all together in contributing and coordinating their content. Having presenters from the very beginning of the training would facilitate this process.
- To ensure the optimal delivery of training program, presenters should be able to interact and involve actively participants during all the part of the training sessions. This could be done through exercises, group workshops, energizers, sessions for open discussions, sharing experiences and skills.
- In order to be effective and ensure the technical and theoretical part of the training, workshops and discussion sessions should be clearly separated.

3.c. Training Program

The Training Course curriculum was based on specific requests coming from Syrian partners and the presenters designed the program according to relevant issues about chemical weapons awareness and documentation covering medical and legal topics. The overall success of the chemical weapons training course demonstrates that the general format and content of the program contains all the elements needed to train activists, legal and medical experts. Future training courses should continue to build on this model, keeping most of its elements and making some improvements based on lessons learned during this course.

Participants, observers and presenters all agreed that the exercises and modules that incorporated practical and theoretical scenarios were extremely useful and effective; this encourages future training to have a combination of theoretical and practical training units. Dividing the training session in medical, legal and documentary segments has been achieved successfully. The challenge is the subdivision of time for each session (presentation, exercise, discussion and questions) and many participants recommended having separate time for discussion. Additional areas that participants felt more time should be spent on include: first aid, how to react to biological weapons and a more practical part to deepen the issue of how to present a documented incident to court.

Recommendations:

- To ensure the respect of the schedule and to keep the level of participation up, a maximum of three sessions per day seems to be more opportune with a longer lunch time (two hours).
- An afternoon off early in the training week allows participants to regain energy after long travel to the venue and allows them to interact informally with each other. This should be kept in mind during future training schedule planning.
Future programs should devote more time to practical and group exercises. Since the theoretical portions of the Training Course were also deemed essential, they should not be eliminated but should be integrated to the other where possible.

The first part of generic introduction is important in providing all participants with a common baseline of knowledge on the topics, but the core issue of the training should be tackled as soon as possible, in a profound and very practical way. The general aspect should also as much as possible be covered in a practical way.

Some participants currently active in the field on the issues brought forward during this training would highly benefit from specific training devoted to project and proposal writing in order to be effective in keeping their existing activities within the scope of NPWJ's project alive. Such trainings could be organised as side- or follow-up events with selected participants.
ANNEX 1

Training summary course program

Monday, 7 October 2013

Arrival of participants in Gaziantep and transfer to the Teymur Continental Hotel
16h00-19h00 Registration desk open at the Teymur Continental Hotel
19h00-21h00 Informal evening reception (introductions of speakers and topics)

Tuesday, 8 October 2013

up to 09h00 Breakfast at the hotel (for participants staying at the hotel)
09h00-10h30 Opening Session
10h30-11h00 Coffee Break
11h00-12h30 General overview on Chemical weapons
12h30-14h00 Lunch Break
14h00-15h30 International Legal Framework on Chemical Weapons
15h30-16h00 Coffee Break
16h00-17h30 Nature of Chemical Weapons
17h30-18h00 Daily Wrap-up
19h30-21h00 Dinner at hotel

Wednesday, 9 October 2013

up to 09h00 Breakfast at the hotel (for participants staying at the hotel)
09h00-10h30 Effects of Chemical Weapons
10h30-11h00 Coffee Break
11h00-12h30 Documentation of crimes under international law
12h30-14h00 Lunch Break
14h00-19h30 Free Afternoon
19h30-21h00 Dinner available at hotel

Thursday, 10 October 2013

up to 09h00 Breakfast at the hotel (for participants staying at the hotel)
09h00-10h30 Documentation of use or existence of chemical weapons
10h30-11h00 Coffee Break
11h00-12h30 Environmental and biological samples
12h30-14h00 Lunch Break
14h00-15h30 Risk Awareness and Risk Management on chemical weapons
15h30-16h00 Coffee Break
16h00-17h30 Post event actions and procedures
17h30-18h00 Daily Wrap-up
19h30-21h00  Dinner at hotel
21h00–22h30  Evening Discussion (at venue)

Friday, 11 October 2013
up to 09h00  Breakfast at the hotel (for participants staying at the hotel)
09h00-12h30  Workshop Session
12h30-14h00  Lunch
14h00-17h30  Workshop Session
17h30-18h00  Daily Wrap-up
19h30-22h00  Social Dinner at local restaurant

Saturday, 12 October 2013
up to 09h00  Breakfast at the hotel (for participants staying at the hotel)
09h00-10h30  Reserved
10h30-11h00  Coffee break
11h00-12h30  Individual Criminal Responsibility for chemical weapons attacks
12h30-14h00  Lunch
14h00-15h30  Closing the training
19h30-21h00  Dinner at hotel
ANNEX 2: PARTICIPANTS LIST

Participants
For security reasons, the list of participants cannot be published

Observers
1. Annika Folkeson, The Day After
2. Barbara Gallo, European Union External Action

Presenters
1. Alastair Hay, University of Leeds
2. Salvatore Carrara, Italian Army
3. Hamis de Bretton-Gordon, SecureBio Ltd
4. Alison Smith, NPWJ
5. Niccolò Figà-Talamanca, NPWJ