PUBLIC INFORMATION/COMMUNICATIONS ORGANISATION

1.0 Background

The incident command system is the most widely used structure for emergency response and is recommended by the IAEA. This presentation explains the Incident Command System and the place of public information/communications within it and also introduces the key public information/communications activities. It ensures that the participants get a better understanding on the Incident Command System used to respond to a nuclear or radiological emergency and to understand how the Public Information Officer role is organized and its place in the overall response system.

2.0 Features of incident command structure or (ICS)

- A common terminology to ensure that all responders use terms that are standard and consistent;
- A modular organization that allows the structure to expand or contract to meet the needs of the incident/emergency;
- Integrated communications; and
- A unified command structure with manageable span of control.

One of the important features of ICS is that: The size of the response organization is scalable to the needs of the specific emergency. The types of functions used can also be varied according to these specific needs. For example, not all of the groups may be required for a small emergency, so these functions may be combined.

One of the key advantages to ICS is that:

- I. It allows different disciplines and functions to work together in a unified structure with unified decision making.
- II. For public information, this also allows for coordination between different organizations that may be involved in responding to a radiation emergency, such as ministries responsible for radiation protection, health, the environment and food. For example during an accident involving a nuclear power plant, the public information group may include representatives from the environment ministry, health ministry, civil protection as well as the regulatory authority. By working together as one information team.
- III. ICS helps to coordinate information and communication activities between responding organizations.

3.0 Basic structure of an ICS organization

Public information is part of the command section. It reports directly to the Incident Commander, but will need to have liaison officers to gather information from the planning and operations sections in order to develop information to be communicated to the public and media.

Depending on the size of the emergency, the PIO function may be undertaken by an individual or group.

It is important to note that in ICS terminology, the information function refers to public information activities. The communications function refers to radio communications/telecommunications. The two should not be confused, particularly in emergencies where other responder groups such as the military, police or fire, will use standard ICS terminology.

For the IAEA, the information role is called the Public Information Officer or PIO.

In ICS, the primary four sections can be further subdivided into smaller functions as needed. Normally, the organization is divided into branches depending on the nature of the activity or geographic responsibility.

The overall objective of the lecture is to give participants an understanding of how the public information or communications role functions within the ICS to respond to the public and media's need for information about a radiation emergency

4.0 Organization and planning

For most emergencies involving radiation, the demands for public and media information will require more than one person. For this reason the PIO also stands for the public information officer group. The size of this group will depend on the information demands, which are not necessarily driven only by the severity of the emergency. Public perception of risk may be greater than the actual risk; the public information response will therefore also need to be greater.

In addition to organizing the staff assigned to the PIO into a logical working structure, the PIO will also have to have liaison officers to attend key meetings and discussions in the planning and operation sections. Although it is possible for briefings to be provided to PIO staff, it will be much easier for staff attuned to public information to pick up issues and identify information needs first hand.

To be effective, the PIO must also be supported by appropriate experts who can provide technical advice in the development of all media and public information materials.

The spokesperson(s), usually technical experts who are both credible and good communicators, will also need to be designated. The spokesperson should report to the Lead PIO. To maintain consistency, the number of spokespeople should be kept as small as possible, depending on the workload. During an emergency, demands from media, local, national and international will be intense and it may not be feasible for one person to take on this role on a 24/7 basis. Where multiple spokespersons are used, it will be vital to ensure that information provided is consistent. Any inconsistencies may be picked up by media and could undermine the credibility of the emergency response.

In addition to developing the organization for the PIO, plans and procedures must be developed to guide the activities that the PIO will undertake during an emergency.

For most organizations, there will be already existing procedures for preparing and issuing news releases and other information products, as well as for media monitoring, media relations, and posting material to the organization's website.

In the event of a radiation emergency, timelines will be shorter and pressure to produce information will be high. The procedures will have to be reviewed to determine whether they need to be adjusted and also whether new procedures for review and authorization will be needed.

National level plans and procedures should to be in place to coordinate public communications activities with regional and/ or local authorities. While information may be provided to the public from these different levels, it is vital to the credibility of the response that the information itself be consistent. Procedures should identify roles and responsibilities of the different actors in the public information response. They should include specific mechanisms for coordination of information between all levels, especially local, regional and international.

Other practical arrangements to be included in procedures include:

- Staff roster with contact information, activation arrangements for the PIO
- A description of the skills, training or experience that may be required for each function within the PIO
- Dissemination capabilities (fact distribution services, listserv..) for news release, public information notices, protective directives, etc
- Media monitoring (national, international)
- Draft fact sheets and questions and answers
- Maps and illustrations
- Translation services as required
- Templates for news releases, speaking points etc,
- Toll free number for public calls
- Logistics and procedures to establish dedicated public information centre

Training of staff on plans and procedures as well their specific roles during an emergency will also be required.

5.0 Incident command system

The Public Information Officer (PIO)/Group may involve a single person for a small-scale emergency, or a team to fulfill the various functions that may be required in the response to a radiation emergency. The PIO is part of the command section and reports directly to the Incident Commander (IC).

The PIO is responsible for keeping media and the public informed during an emergency and for coordinating with all sources of official information.

Where there is a team of people needed, the staff assigned to the PIO will report to a Lead Officer who then reports to the IC. The structure of the team and their roles will be dependent on the complexity, size, duration of the emergency and the dedicated resources available. At a minimum, two people will be needed to allow for rotation and relief. But it is extremely unlikely that even the smallest scale radiation emergency could be handled by one sole PIO (with alternate).

One question you will all have to answer is where to find the staff that will be needed for the public information officer group in an emergency. Staff may need to come from different ministries to deal with the workload, or some activities (such as media monitoring and translation) could be contracted out to private companies.

The Incident Command System refers to the structure used to integrate all response activities into one management structure. It should be noted that the ICS does not have to occur all within the same facility.

There are two types of emergency facilities or locations: those established in advance (an emergency response centre at a nuclear power plant or government ministry) and those established at the time of the emergency. This ICS may incorporate both into its structure, whereby certain functions, such as finance/administration an logistics are undertaken from a pre-established facility, while other functions are in a facility established specifically for the task (task team).

For public information, activities may by necessity be undertaken in different facilities. Other activities, such as website updates, translation, printing, media monitoring, etc, may take place in regular offices. If the response organization has set up a emergency response centre, some activities, such as liaising with the planning and operations sections may take place at this centre.

Public information staff may work from different locations, resulting in the need for easy channels for communications (mobile telephone, email and Internet access, and fax machines). Geographic locations may also need to be considered in planning a structure for the PIO.

6.0 Public information centre

A public information centre (PIC) may be set up as a centralized facility to provide information directly to the public and media. The PIC is located in a secure area in the vicinity of the emergency scene near the incident command post with space and infrastructure to support media briefings.

Most emergency plans for nuclear power plants already have a location identified for the PIC. If a facility for the PIC has not been established, as part of emergency preparedness plans public information staff will need to identify potential locations and define requirements for telephone, internet and other essential services. Should a state there be a fixed location where radiation is used, consideration can be given in advance as to where to locate the PIC. Should there not be a fixed location or should there be multiple locations, public information staff will have to make arrangements to identify and set up a suitable location on an urgent basis.

Consider converting a current facility, such as a visitor's centre or training centre. Commercial sites could also be considered such as hotels, auditoriums or community centres. Equipment and materials can be either kept locked on site or maintained and delivered by the Logistics Section as part of the response inventory. Regardless of which facility is used, equipment and materials will need to be checked regularly and maintained. This should also include keeping any check lists or procedures to be used by staff at the PIC up-to-date. The PIC may be needed within 24 hours of the initial emergency.

7.0 Conclusion

In a complex emergency, the PIO will require a team of experienced public information staff organized into an appropriate structure, Plans, procedures and practical arrangements will need to be established in advance in order for the PIO to undertake key activities to inform the public and media, these plans, procedures and arrangements should be exercised on a regular basis.