Global EOC Exercise (GEOCX)
4-6 December 2018

Frequently asked questions

- What is the GEOCX Exercise?

WHO has developed a framework to provide Member States with high-level guidance for establishing or strengthening a functional Public Health Emergency Operations Centre (PHEOC). With Member States and international health emergency support agencies, WHO has undertaken a series of simulation exercises to assess the functionality and interoperability of the PHEOCs of selected Member States.

- What is a Public Health Emergency Operations Centre (PHEOC)?

A PHEOC is a type of emergency operations centre that is addresses the specific requirements for coordinating responses to public health emergencies such as communicable disease outbreaks. Such a centre is a physical location or virtual space in which designated emergency management functions are performed. It is supported by appropriate legal authority and regulations, and designed and resourced with sustainability in mind. All emergency operations centres perform a vital role in the coordination of information and resources for efficient and effective responses to emergency events. An operations centre may be a temporary facility or may be established in a permanent location.

- What is an exercise?

Exercises comprise a variety of forms of training and evaluation. In this functional exercise a global public health event is simulated through the introduction of events in a scenario. People in the EOC will respond to the simulated events in their normal roles in the centre, drawing on established plans and procedures. This allows them to practice and maintain critical skill sets, and to continuously improve the overall functioning of the EOC, based on post exercise evaluations.

- What is the scenario?

This scenario involves the introduction of a novel virus causing severe acute respiratory symptoms (SAR) in a cluster of disease with high mortality and significant morbidity. The disease appears first on a fictional island and is then exported to other countries who are participating in the exercise.
• How does the exercise work?

GEOCX is a simulated interactive exercise that is focused on the management of acute public health events. This will be a ‘functional’ exercise which will provide an opportunity for all players and entities to demonstrate and enhance their understanding of the event management processes by practicing their various roles and responsibilities during an international health security event.

GEOCX, along with other activities, is part of the commitment of WHO and partners to assist Member States to develop and maintain effectiveness in the management of public health events that may have national, regional and international implications. This exercise supports Member States in pandemic preparedness and response activities.

• Is this the first exercise of its kind?

Two exercises have been conducted in 2018. The first was conducted in Jordan in January at the Ministry of Public Health EOC, followed by an exercise in Senegal hosted by the Senegal Health Emergency Operations Centre in Dakar in May. A Global Emergency Operations Centre Exercise (GEOCX) will be conducted 4-6 December 2018 as the third and final in the series.

• What will be learned from this exercise?

GEOCX is expected to yield practical information about the efficiency of procedures, discover gaps in planning and operational responses, build on strengths and identify opportunities for improving plans and procedures.

Evaluators drawn from Asia, North America, Europe, and Africa will be watching how the participating EOCs perform in real time, measuring performance against what is expected from existing procedures.

The exercise offers participants a way to test their plans and capabilities in a realistic environment to gain an in-depth experience that can best be achieved by practice.

• What exercises have already taken place in 2018?

The first exercise of the series was a discussion-based exercise conducted in Jordan on 29 January 2018 at the Ministry of Health Public Health EOC. It included participation by the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Health. The purpose of the exercise was to familiarize PHEOC management and potential members of the Incident Management Team with their recently approved Emergency Response Plan and associated Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs).

The second exercise of the series was a regional functional exercise was conducted 8-9 May 2018 hosted by the Senegal Health Emergency Operations Centre in Dakar. Countries participating as players included Senegal, Nigeria, Liberia, Cote d’Ivoire and the Gambia. The
purpose of this second exercise was to assess the readiness of the Senegal HEOC to respond to a public health emergency and functional and technological interoperability with other EOCs in the region. It also validated the ability of the EOC-NET to design and conduct a multinational, bilingual exercise.

- Why is this exercise taking place now?

It has been a decade since the last pandemic and 100 years since the last global pandemic that resulted in the death of many millions. These events occur periodically and it is a matter of a time before another global pandemic. Member States have been working diligently with WHO to be prepared for the next event.

- What are the expectations of a participating Member State?

The International Health Regulations (IHR 2005) requires that Member States develop the means to manage communicable disease and share information between their management infrastructures (EOCs). Participating Member States will participate (play) in the exercise from the facilities they would normally occupy during the management of an event of the type and magnitude in the exercise scenario.

- How is the exercise developed?

A team of international, national, and sub-national experts in emergency management and infectious disease control from around the world jointly developed this exercise following a well-established process on how best to design, conduct, and evaluate an exercise.

- What happens if there is a real-world emergency during the exercise?

The exercise will be halted immediately. No essential personnel will be diverted from any type of actual emergency response during this exercise. Participating WHO units and Member States also have the option of withdrawing any of their players from the exercise at any time to address matters or concerns directly related to their public safety missions.

- Will the public be affected by the exercise while it is taking place?

No. This is an exercise where there is no deployment of people or goods. The exercise will not affect public or official activity at all.

- What are the benefits to participating?

Member States will have an opportunity to test their plans and capabilities in a realistic environment to gain an in-depth experience that can only be achieved by practice.
This experience will help identify gaps and areas for opportunity that will ultimately help in the assessment and improvement of Member States’ readiness to respond jointly and effectively to a global public health emergency.

- When does the exercise take place?

The exercise takes place from Tuesday, 4 December through to Thursday, 6 December 2018. An initial media briefing will be available immediately before exercise commencement and additional in-process briefings may be available to the media during, and after the exercise, at the discretion of the participating Member State.

- What is required of participating Member States?

Depending on the intended level of participation, Member States are required to utilize their emergency operations system Plans and Procedures. Players in each location will deal with the inputs according to known plans and procedures, or based on their best judgment if these did not fully anticipate events. The local facilitators will be in electronic and voice communication with the lead facilitator and simulation team in Geneva to keep them informed about the pace of local progress in dealing with the inputs. Participants are required to provide records of their interactions as part of the exercise evaluation process.

- How do I find out more information?

Contact the Public Information Officers in participating Member States’ regional WHO offices and WHO Communications in Geneva.

- What are the future plans after the exercise?

Exercises are part of a commitment to training and practicing. Training programs should evolve to meet altered circumstances, opportunities and changes in personnel, resulting in the need for future exercises.

- How much does the exercise cost?

Since no personnel or equipment will be deployed during the exercise, the cost is minimal. Most personnel involved will participate in the exercise from the facilities they would normally occupy. The exercise itself imposes few costs while the planning costs have been factored into regular operations.

- Where does the exercise take place?

The exercise takes place in the participating Member States who have volunteered and is managed by WHO at Headquarters and Regional Offices.
• Can non-participating Member States observe the exercise?

There will be opportunity for some observers of the exercise. This will be managed on a case-by-case basis by participating Member States. Many PHEOCs are modest in size and cannot accommodate observers.

• Which Member States are participating in the exercise?

WHO is working with a number of Member States and Regional Offices to conduct the exercise. A number of countries have already committed from Africa, Asia, and North America.

• Will there be reporting on each countries performance?

Each participating entity will conduct its own internal evaluation. In addition, WHO will publish an exercise evaluation that will capture overall themes and lessons learned.

• What kind of media coverage will the exercise produce?

Participating Member States may issue press releases, as will WHO. In the normal course of events in a real emergency, the preparation of public information messages for the media is actually one of the EOC’s functions. There will be a media briefing before the exercise that will provide opportunities to address any questions that may arise.

• Is there a media package? Is there a spokesperson?

WHO will provide a brief media package just before exercise commencement. Each Member State will have a spokesperson, as will WHO. Participation in the exercise is public information, but it is important to contain the information surrounding the scenario to ensure that the exercise is as realistic as possible.

• Why is this exercise important?

Communicable diseases do not recognize geographic boundaries. This exercise is an opportunity to train systems and people utilizing a scenario that we hope will never happen, but need to practice.

• What is the pathogen?

The pathogen is a novel virus causing severe respiratory symptoms and normally reportable under the International Health Regulations.

• Where can I learn more?

Contact the Public Information Officer for the National Health Authority in your country or the Communications unit in the WHO regional office, or in Geneva.