

# Commandant and Commanders Conference 2009

This is the third in the series of closed conferences, the CBRN Commandant and Commanders Conference, the other two were held in Sonthofen and Panama City (see *CBRNe World* Winter 2007). This year's event was held in the Czech city of Liberec, which is also the home of the Czech CBRN Corps, and brought together participants from 16, mainly Nato, nations. Previously General Spoehr had set out that the Commandants' conference should reach out to Asian and Pacific Rim countries, and evidence of that was there in Japan's presence.

The conference itself is aimed at senior CBRN officers, mainly Commandants of NBC schools and Commanders of NBC units, though their staff also attend. Last year was a "role" call of what the various nations were doing in terms of CBRN defence, and there was a certain amount of that this year too. So delegates learned from Colonel Utsunomiya of the work that the new Central Defence Unit would be doing in Japan, as well as reports on some of the work that Nato and Shape were doing from Dusan Lupulev, David Lindsey and Marius Wojnar. There was also a report on some of the JPEO CBD's projects from Jessee Wright and a status update from Michel Desgranges on the work of Nato's Defence Against Terrorism (DAT) CBRN.

While there is some benefit from learning what new Commandants, such as Colonel Les Smith, have to say, there needs to be a format for this annual conference to ensure that the event doesn't turn into a status report. This was recognised at last year's and also at this year's conference, that there needs to be a theme to try and drag some of the best learning and experiences out of the participating nations. There are a great deal of conferences in the circuit, and to ensure that this select, closed, meeting adds value it will need to evolve.

The Czech Republic, as you might expect, were excellent hosts, the Babylon Centre Hotel was an interesting choice (with a Gormenghastian choice of lifts – who knows where you might end up!) but what made the event especially worthwhile was the chance to visit the BSL4 facility at Techonin and the exercise at Liberec. The Czech Chemical Corps are more of a feature on the international circuit than the Central Military Health Institute, which handles the Czech military biological defence piece, so it is a rarer opportunity to hear from them. While they have a great deal of equipment and capability, one of their most valuable assets is the Bio Defence Centre at Techonin. This is their "Specialised Hospital for Infectious Diseases". While there has been a facility here since 1958, its role as an isolation hospital and centre for outbreak control is a new one. The facility has approximately 50 BSL4 isolation beds, a built-in large expectation capacity, the BSL4 lab, a clinical lab and mortuary. While the system will have a "tick-over" capability

for those soldiers who return from operations with a suspected exotic infection, its core role will emerge during either a bio attack or a naturally occurring outbreak. It is a modern, well equipped and serviced facility that is keen to find a larger role in both EU and Nato plans – well worth a visit!

Equally of value was the demonstration that the Chemical Corps put on. This was a repeat of the demonstration that they put on for DAT CBRN, and was an example of why the Czechs are so highly regarded in Nato. While they have a historically recognised capability in decontamination and detection, the demonstration also showed their mass decontamination and high-level casualty-extraction capability, which have been added on to their traditional military skills.

Next year's event will be hosted by the Bulgarians, and this will be an interesting challenge. Previous events, Germany, the US and the Czech Republic, have managed to overcome some of the shortfalls in the conference by demonstrations of their own impressive capability. The Bulgarians are not in the same league as the previous hosts, and there will have to be some solid work done on the theme of the conference and the spread of the delegates to ensure that the event is kept relevant. There is no doubt that the audience can provide presentations of interest to each other, the difficulty will be in teasing out what they are and presenting them in a coherent approach.



*The Czech forces laid on helicopters to take all the delegates to their BSL4 facility*

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