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### Background

HELCOM BALEX Delta 2020 was organized by Estonia on 26 August 2020 off the coast of Tallinn. Enclosed is the report of the exercise by the Exercise Evaluation Team (EET).

### Action requested

The Meeting is invited discuss the document with special focus on the recommendations provided.

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# BALEX Delta 2020

report by

## Exercise Evaluation Team (EET)

This report is based on EET operational observations and questionnaire replies from participants and is intended for discussions within HELCOM Response working group.

BALEX Delta 2020 was organised and hosted by Estonia. It was intended to build further on the experiences from international involvement in the planning and in the practical phase being a "traditional" BALEX Delta underlining the commitment among HELCOM Parties to assist each other in case of a major pollution incident.

BALEX Delta was deeply affected by the consequences of COVID-19 pandemic. Below consequences will be described in detail.

The overall assessment is Estonia did a commendable job in adapting the exercise while maintaining the focus on establishing an exercise with the maximum possible benefit for the participants.

### Evaluation

#### EET composition

Due to travel restrictions the composition of EET had to be adapted. Adaption was agreed between Response Chair, BALEX Delta project leader and EET lead. EET ended up consisting of two members from Finland, one member from Estonia and EET lead from Denmark. Only Finnish and Estonian evaluators were present at the exercise.

Response manual Vol 1 (para 10.5) states the EET to consist of three members (last year, this year and next year hosts). Three members seem insufficient for evaluation in light of shoreline exercises have been an integrated part of BALEX Deltas and to embrace both the command structure and participating vessels as well.

Thus, for BALEX Delta it was the intention to establish an EET with members from five nations;

the nation that hosted two years ago (Sweden)

The nation that hosted one year ago (Denmark-lead)

The nation that hosted the exercise (Estonia)

The nation that hosts next year's exercise (Finland)

The nation that hosts the exercise in two years (Germany)

Besides adding manpower to the evaluation the two extra nations extends the continuity between BALEX Deltas. The nation that hosted the exercise two years ago brings valid findings from their own exercise. The nation to host in two years will have to start planning more than one year in advance of their exercise and by participating they will synchronised with the exercise of the times in due time.

**Recommendation:** HELCOM Response to discuss the composition (size) of EET.

EET work was based on merged Evaluation Guidance and Evaluation Plan documents into one document as evaluation documents had to await clarity about the consequences of COVID-19 to the exercise and evaluation.

### **Planning**

At a very initial planning stage in the autumn 2019 Estonia called for the training requirements from the Parties.

A Main Planning Conference (MPC) was held in January. All HELCOM parties were invited to the MPC as well as the Estonian entities involved in the exercise. The majority of Parties attended. EMSA attended on behalf of EU.

The basis for MPC was a set of general settings provided by the host. The focus for the participants was to plan how the exercise objectives and the training objectives should be met. The international involvement was very beneficial and should set the standard for future BALEX Deltas.

**Recommendation:** HELCOM Response HREP should specify whether international involvement should be the rule for BALEX Delta planning.

The objectives for BALEX Delta aimed at two levels. Some objectives were overarching and general, while others were more specific and originated from the training requirements handed in by the nations.

Although defined as a scenario-based exercise at the MPC, the detailed planning to meet the training requirements indicated the exercise would have to be serialised with pre-defined list of events to ensure the requirements would be met.

As COVID-19 spread across Europe, the plan for BALEX Delta 2020 went into a phase of constant contingency planning. Estonia set up a number of rational deadlines and in due time participants (and EET) were informed.

### **BALEX Bravo**

BALEX Bravo (alarm/communications exercise) is an integrated part of BALEX Delta

BALEX Bravo was conducted two weeks prior to BALEX Delta by parallel information exchange via CECIS Marine Pollution operational mode and telefax.

The majority of Parties replied to the BALEX Bravo questionnaire. The general feedback of the BALEX Bravo is positive and indicates the Parties exercised their live chain of command as it should be.

At the same time there was a real life CECIS request for assistance related to WAKASHIO grounding in Mauritius and handling this event took priority where prioritisation of efforts was required. But the prioritisation took focus from BALEX Bravo. Use of CECIS MP Operational Mode is not the rule of thumb but occasionally necessary to verify lines of

communication. However, as it was noted by some Parties, exercises in Operational Mode while a real life event takes place simultaneously should be avoided.

There were no recommendations for other changes to BALEX Bravo.

### **BALEX Delta**

BALEX Delta was held 26 August in the waters west of the Estonian Naissaar Island. It was based on a collision-scenario and included an Estonian-Finish bilateral SAR exercise and an international oil spill response exercise.

The SAR exercise is not within the EET scope, but it provided good training. JRCC command and control was clear and to the point and ships and helo were utilised effectively

A real tanker was used for the exercise. Use of a real ship to act as leaking vessel is very effective and allowed relevant tasks like enclosing the ship with booms, hull inspection etc.

**Recommendation:** Whenever possible at least one ship from the scenario should be played by a real ship and preferably a merchant ship.

### **Covid-19 effects**

Estonia adapted to the unpredictable development in COVID-19 across the Baltic Region. Deadlines for decisions and documents/deliveries were adjusted to the situation.

At July 1<sup>st</sup> a combined EXSPEC with selected parts of the content normally stated in an EXPLAN was issued. The document was a good basis for the exercise.

Due to COVID-19 a number of significant changes had to be applied:

Nations re-considered whether they would withdraw their participating ships due to have the ships stand-by domestically in light of the unpredictability in the pandemic development. Foreign ships would not enter port in Estonia, causing cancellation of open ship arrangement, social event and sports competition. This caused a logistic challenge as some of the ships would lack supplies and the crews would not enjoy the social side-benefits of the Baltic brotherhood.

The (national) VIP program and the observers' program were cancelled

### **Command and Control**

JRCC acted as incident command and KINDRAL KURVITS as SOSC. JRCC handled the exercise by their daily watch team without additional manning. On one hand this reasserts the robustness of the watch team to handle such situations. On the other hand – for exercise planning considerations – it challenges the exercise if a live event happens simultaneously as live events take precedence. No live events occurred and the exercise confirmed the watch organisation's robustness and ability to handle an oil spill response.

The far majority of information exchange and orders were given on VHF or email. This is how it should be to make sure information provided to more than one receiver is the same. In the initial phase VHF net was loaded heavily but assignment of additional VHF channels solved the issue. Orders and situation reports (SITREPS) between JRCC and SOSC worked

well. A good rhythm with hourly reports was established. Good work by SOSC. VHF discipline at sea was good and information clear but occasionally transmissions lacked the use of professional terminology. However, the use of professional terminology improved over the day and was far better during response part than during SAR part.

Some points for consideration:

EET never overheard or gained insight in SITREPS from ships to OCS/SOSC. Such SITREPS are important. They should follow the common format and should if necessary be provided on a working channel for this particular strike team. Communications structure is important.

EET did not observe that long time (24 or 48 hours) planning was included in neither the JRCC nor SOSC routine. Such planning is important. It is somehow natural this planning is forgotten as +everybody know the exercise is over within 8 hours+ but the ability to plan ahead is paramount at command level and should be exercised.

**Recommendation:** The tasking for command functions at BALEX Delta should include 24 and 48 hours ahead planning and at the finalisation of the exercise such planning should be provided in the final SITREP to higher level and subordinates.

EMSA contracted vessel NORDEN with an organic RPAS (drone) participated in the exercise. NORDEN utilised the RPAS but it was not verified by EET that the Estonian JRCC or SOSC checked downlink from drone. Downlink is considered to be a vital tool in case of a real life spill, but the GSM connectivity in the exercise area was too poor to handle downlink. Options to overcome poor connectivity should be examined.

In general the scenario was satisfactory as basis for the exercise, but it was noted that the +storytelling+ could be improved in order to link the events and shoreline-seagoing parts of the exercise better together. Also, eventually, it was noted the scenario did not challenge the command levels to their very maximum, but bear in mind COVID-19 caused decrease in number of participants and less stress in the chain of command.

### Activities

It has been noted by several evaluators and participants the exercise provided a suitable workload. The units were busy and the tasks were relevant. To this point the management by the SOSC should be commended. On the other hand, it was also noted that the oil spill response exercise was very short. Short duration is partly caused by the preceding SAR training but also because the exercise ended while there were still hours of daylight ahead.

**Recommendation:** HELCOM Response should define the minimum duration of the oil spill response part of the exercise to ensure sufficient training value.

STS operations provided valuable training. Participant(s) addressed that HELCOM could benefit from having guidelines/checklists for STS operations. Such checklists may potentially duplicate MARPOL documents, but would increase the awareness.

**Recommendation:** HELCOM Response manual should include either STS checklists or link to a homepage with checklist.

EMSA EAS was available for the exercise. The equipment is only available if insurance or liability guarantee is arranged in advance.

If a requirement for training with EMSA equipment is addressed in the planning of the exercise it is advisable to utilise BALEX Delta for this training. Normally more than one

EU/EFTA nation would benefit from training with EMSA equipment. EET encourages, but will let it be up to host nation to decide, that host nation signs the contract with EMSA to assure valuable training with the equipment.

To sum up EET observations indicated Estonia has good capability to lead oil prevention procedures and coordinate multinational oil response operations. BALEX Delta was well planned and under the circumstances well arranged. The majority of nations replied to questionnaire for the alarm exercise but only a minority of ships replied to the scoreboard for the seagoing exercise. But the unanimous standpoint of all answers is BALEX Delta was a worthwhile exercise.