

Round table on facilitating the transport of radioactive material

In response to a request from Mr D.Poggio in Procurement, and as a result of information obtained during the 52nd General Conference the transport unit of NSRW became aware of a need for improved internal communication and co-ordinated action on the matter of denial of shipment with respect to IAEA activities. As a result Mr Bruno, under direction from the head of the transport unit, initiated the first round table discussion on delays and denials of shipment of radioactive material on 24 November 2008 in room A0742.

Mr J.Wheatley, Acting Head, Regulatory Infrastructure and Transport Section, Division of Radiation, Transport and Waste Safety welcomed the participants at the meeting. He pointed out that while the Agency was receiving reports on the delays and denials taking place elsewhere, the issue has started impacting the Agency's programmes and hence this round table discussion. Mr Wheatley mentioned that a similar round-table discussion was held with Member States during the General Conference and it was a success. This round-table discussion is intended to address in-house issues arising from denials of shipment. Concluding, he invited Mr. N.Bruno of the Transport Safety Unit to conduct the proceedings.

Mr J.Stewart, Head, Transport Safety Unit, initiating the discussions, informed the participants about the International Steering Committee, its mandate and the Action Plan. Delays of shipment often had the same consequence as denials had. Thus issue before the Agency was more fundamental than delays and denials. He gave examples of consequences of delays and denials which demonstrated that because of delays and denials the very sustainability of transport of radioactive material was in peril.

Mr Bruno gave a detailed overview of the issue. Describing the Action Plan of the International Steering Committee, he stated that some potential denial situations were averted because the concerned officials were educated about the consequences of delays and denials. He described the utility of the incident reports in the prescribed format. As of now, 100 reports have been filed with the Agency. The various regional workshops have started paying rich dividends. In all the regions covered, coordination activities among the Member States in the region have commenced. Mr Bruno elaborated on the role of the National Focal Point (NFP). The need for a focal point for the Agency came up for discussion. This topic figured often during the discussions.

In specific instances, the Agency has intervened and facilitated the transport of radioactive material as for example, in the Santo Domingo harbour (Dominican Republic) incident involving the handling of iron bars and a consignment of yellow cake (Uranium Concentrate). In another instance, a query raised by the Agency with the French Permanent Mission about a potential denial issue resulted in a quick response action on the part of the French authorities. That is, Agency's interventions have helped in some specific instances.

Mr Bruno invited comments and suggestions from the participants. Here are some of the salient points that emerged in the discussions that followed:

1. Mr. D.Poggio (Head, Procurement and Customer Service Unit of the Agency) reported that Procurement is confronted with the final problem resulting in delays of months in delivering materials. His unit has received complaints about delays and denials on a weekly basis. Corroborating the arguments given by Mr Stewart, it was pointed out that enormous cost was incurred because of detouring of shipments occasioned by denials.
2. It was suggested that the National Liaison Officer of Member States could be involved in handling instances of denial of shipments addressed to his / her nation. When it was pointed out that denials rarely occurred at the destination but in one or more of the intermediate States, an instance of denial occurring in the recipient State came to light. In such cases, the National Liaison Officer could be involved in addressing the issue.

3. It was necessary that in-house awareness of the issue of delays and denials be improved.
4. An analysis of the reports received so far indicates that delays / denials occur most frequently by air mode, involving mostly packages containing small quantities of medical isotopes which generally have short half-lives.
5. It was suggested that the affected unit of the Agency could file their reports in the prescribed form addressed to the Head, Transport Safety Unit, NSRW until a more formal arrangement for filing the reports from the Agency were worked out.
6. Some of the countries where problems of denial are encountered do not have an NFP. It was suggested that the Agency should encourage/push these States to nominate NFPs as soon as possible. Mr. Bruno explained that the Note Verbale requesting NFPs goes to governments. A government does not always understand when they need to be involved – some see it as a business problem not a government problem. Often a government needs a specific case to get a specific action. Additionally, he explained that the IAEA has no mandate to force a solution for this problem.
7. Variations in the individual national regulations are often a reason for denials / delays on the grounds of non-compliance. Some times it is the variations in the regulations or even certain administrative procedures that could cause denial.
8. There appeared to be no technical basis for denial of shipments.
9. The various relevant entities that have a role to play in the transport scenario such as carriers, cargo staff, public authorities, etc. should be informed about the many useful applications of radioactive materials. If they know about the purpose for which the materials are transported they may not stop the shipments.
10. Ms. MH.Sampa (NA) mentioned that Cuba, Morocco, Poland, Viet Nam and Romania as being particularly difficult nations. She said often we are missing NFP in key countries where there are problems. She asked that the group be sent the Montevideo Group webpage. She also asked how can she get NFP's in these countries?
11. Ms. C.Mueller (NA) suggested that the services of an NGO could be utilised by the Agency for lobbying the authorities about the useful purpose served by radioactive materials, the safety standards in vogue and the need for facilitating the shipments. The NGOs engaged thus should be credible organizations and should not have any commercial interest in facilitating transport of radioactive materials.
12. Ms. MH.Sampa (NA) recommended that training programmes specifically addressing the issue of delays and denials should be conducted in all the regions.
13. Ms. E.Aldover added that the training packages (for cargo handlers, port/airport authorities, customs) should be implemented in a permanent basis.
14. Ms. H.Ngau (Procurement) alerted about a project in Costa Rica which was cancelled due to impossibility in delivering radioactive material in that country.
15. Mr. D.Poggio (Procurement) proposed that this in-house round table discussion should be held again in about a month.