Israel Begins Vaccinating Health Workers for Smallpox

By SERGE SCHMEMANN

JERUSALEM, Aug. 16 — With concerns mounting that an American attack on Iraq could provoke some form of retaliatory strike against Israel, the Health Ministry has begun vaccinating about 1,500 health workers against smallpox, a spokesman said today.

The spokesman, Ido Hadari, stressed that the vaccinations were a preliminary measure, involving those who, if Israel decided on broader measures, would be charged with administering the vaccine to others.

He said the security cabinet would meet on Wednesday to discuss whether to extend the vaccinations to "first responders": police officers, soldiers, emergency medical personnel and hospital workers who would be involved in an immediate response to a biological attack. These could number as many as 150,000.

The vaccinations, he said, began early last month. About 700 people have received them, and about 800 more are scheduled. "If in the future, Israel will decide to vaccinate people, they will be the ones to do the vaccination, so it's wise to know that they are already vaccinated," Mr. Hadari said.

They could also, he said, provide vaccinated plasma — "vaccine immune globulin" — which can be used to protect people who cannot take the regular vaccine, like pregnant women and people with compromised immune systems.

Other health precautions are being taken or are under consideration. Israel's Atomic Energy Committee has said that iodine tablets offering limited protection against radiation will be given soon to people living near Israel's two nuclear reactors. The agency linked the measure to the possibility of a
radiation leak, but the Israeli news media has been full of speculation about what Iraq might do if it came under an American attack, which Israel considers increasingly likely.

Yediot Achronot, a mass circulation tabloid, for example, devoted its first four pages on Thursday to the biological, chemical or radioactive agents that Iraq could launch at Israel, including smallpox, Ebola, anthrax and radioactive "dirty bombs."

Though the United States and other countries are also intensely studying the possibility of biological and chemical attacks, the threat is far more immediate in Israel. During the 1991 Persian Gulf war, Iraq responded to American-led attacks by firing a total of 39 Scud missiles at Israeli cities.

They were armed with conventional explosives and caused little damage, but Israel, concerned about the possibility that they might be charged with chemical or biological agents, distributed gas masks.

With the Bush administration openly weighing a military operation to eliminate the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, the tension is palpable. The most dire speculation has been that Israel, which is known to have developed a nuclear weapon but formally denies having done so, would launch a nuclear strike against Iraq if it came under attack.

So far, the government has sought to avoid worsening the fears by toning down public discussion of the threats. But the smallpox vaccinations, and reports that Israel's Home Front Command intends to include iodine tablets with the gas mask kits that it already distributes, have made clear that serious preparations are under way.

The Israeli military has also confirmed it is deploying a second battery of Arrow missiles, which destroy incoming missiles by exploding in their path, in the center of the country.

Smallpox, a lethal and highly contagious disease, was declared eradicated in 1980 by the World Health Organization, but small quantities of the smallpox virus were retained in depositories in the United States and the former Soviet Union. Though there is no evidence that Iraq has the virus, intelligence officials have been unable to preclude the possibility.

The intensity of the concern was made clear this week when Aryeh Eldad, the head of the team advising the Health Ministry on
epidemiological control, resigned to protest the ministry's rejection of his recommendation to immediately inoculate the entire population.

The health minister, Nissim Dahan, said on Wednesday that Israel had stockpiled enough vaccine to inoculate the population within a few days. Officials said Mr. Eldad's position was a minority opinion, but they acknowledged that his resignation could force the government's hand.

If Israel does decide on mass vaccination, officials said, the national health system, with its network of clinics, should be able to swiftly accomplish it.

"Following Sept. 11, we have prepared ourselves for any scenario, including that of smallpox," Mr. Dahan told Israel Radio. "The Health Ministry is making every effort to complete the inventories of all the medications needed to vaccinate the population. The moment that we receive such an order, the population of the state of Israel can be vaccinated within a few days."

Edward H. Kaplan, a specialist of management sciences and public health at Yale who has been working on responses to bioterror attacks and who recently visited Israel, noted that it has a "distinct organizational advantage" over the United States, since most civilian doctors are also reserve military officers. He said he was told that in the event of an attack, the response would be coordinated by a joint team from the Health Ministry and the army.

Mr. Kaplan said Israel had rejected "ring vaccinations" — a plan considered by the United States — in which people would be vaccinated in a ring around a known infection. If the Israelis determine a need, he said, they will vaccinate everyone.

Israeli Troops Raze 2 Homes

JERUSALEM, Aug. 16 (Reuters) — Israel destroyed two homes today that they said belonged to families of Palestinian militants. The Israeli Army said soldiers blew up the home of Iyad Sawalha near the West Bank city of Tulkarm because of his hand in planning a bus bombing in June near the northern town of Megiddo that killed 17 people. Mr. Sawalha is believed to be in hiding.

Troops also razed the house of Morad Abu Asal in Anabta, near Tulkarm. The army said Mr. Abu Asal carried out a January suicide attack in Taibeh, an Arab village in northern Israel, that wounded two security officials.
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