

A City Prepared: An Overview of London's Biological / Radiological Counter-Terrorism Preparedness

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1.0 A City Prepared: An Overview of London's Biological / Radiological Counter- Terrorism Preparedness

1.1 Foreward

London, along with New York, Washington and Tokyo, is perhaps one of the most iconic cities in the world, and as such is likely to be a high-likelihood target for any future terrorism attack, whether as a result of international Islamic radical groups or domestically produced.

This report gives an overview of the measures that have been developed to prepare for such a scenario, gathering information from a range of sources who are at the heart of the counter-terrorism battle in the UK, as well as being responsible for the development, implementation and management of those programmes, on both a strategic and a daily basis.

The information in this report is based on a series of interviews conducted over the course of two weeks in London in January 2009.

Full details of the people who contributed to this report are listed in the final appendix.

Major Points in this report

- a) Rather than focussing on specific counter-terrorism capabilities, all organisations stress the need to develop general emergency response capabilities that can be used in a wide range of situations, which can then be easily adapted in the event that an extremely rare Counter-Terrorism incident arose.
- b) The single most important element in developing effective multi-agency response capability is the fact that senior commanders of all of the agencies know each other on a personal basis, have worked together in various capacities and have experienced working together on a wide range of training exercises (and not just involving terrorism).
- c) Rather than each emergency service (police, fire and ambulance) developing their own expertise concentrating on their own roles, it is important that there is the development of 'Specialist Emergency Commanders' from all services, who are able to understand the full range of capabilities that each service holds, and how they can best be coordinated and commanded.
- d) The fundamental point of success or failure of multi-agency response capability is based around the effectiveness or otherwise of the Gold Commanders and Silver Commanders, who are responsible for delivering fast response operations on the ground in the event that an actual incident arises.
- e) In order to achieve this, a National Emergency Command School needs to be developed that allows the development of specialist multi-agency skills, and creates an effective group of Gold Commanders.
- f) The authorities and senior personnel in the UK were all extremely open to offering their information and experience, and have expressed interest in developing the UK-Japan relationship further, on either informal or formal levels. They have bilateral exchanges with a number of different police forces, and this should be considered as a possible opportunity to exchange information with personnel and organisations that are considered world-class in all areas of counter-terrorism development and management, including, but not limited to, Biological and Radiological terrorism. It is recommended that these possibilities are explored further.

1.2 Introduction

It is widely considered that London has one of the most well-developed structures for responding to and managing large-scale terrorist attacks, whether of a conventional nature or involving Chemical / Biological /Radiological / Nuclear (CBRN) components. In the conversations that took place in London, two main causes for this advance capability were repeatedly mentioned.

The first is that, even without considering the implications or requirements of a CBRN terrorist attack, London has developed a well-structured emergency response programme that allows all stakeholder agencies, including emergency services, government ministries, local authorities and associated organisations to work together in an effective, coordinated manner to develop the most appropriate response programme depending on the specific threats that they are facing. Once this underlying multi-agency emergency response capability has been developed, then it is relatively simple to add the specific skills and equipment that will allow it to respond effectively to any CBRN incident that might occur.

The second significant factor in the development of specific CBRN capabilities is the amount of time, effort, financing and, perhaps most importantly, sustained on-going political support that has been given to identifying and developing those capabilities that are specifically required in order to develop CBRN counter-terrorism capabilities.

Both of these strands have identified and stressed the single most important principle at the heart of effective CBRN development: the need to correctly balance the requirements of capacity building within each individual organisation, depending on their likely role within any CBRN incident, with the need to ensure that all CBRN response capability is created within a completely integrated multi-agency framework, that provides inter-operability at every level of the operation from government policy advisers within the Cabinet office, through the Command & Control structures at every level of the operation, and down to the first responders who will be working together at the street level.

London, perhaps uniquely amongst major Western cities, has had the experience of being the target for terrorist attacks over a long-term, sustained campaign. As part of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) attempts to force the UK government to give Northern Ireland independence, the IRA waged a terrorist war against mainland UK from 1969 to the official cease-fire in 1998. At the peak of their activities, there were over forty separate bomb attacks in London in the twelve months from April 1992 to April 1993.

As a result of this, London has a generation of high-level police and other operational officers who have had the experience in responding to large scale terrorist attacks, even if only of a conventional nature.

The second basis on which this capability has been built is the result of decisions made following the 9.11 attacks on America.

Given the high possibility of London becoming the target for similar attacks, as well as the high level of complexity of London's government system, with multiple national, regional, city and local government organisational structures inter-twined and overlapping, as well as city, regional and national police agencies, differing government ministries, emergency services, etc it was decided that London needed an over-riding coordination body that would allow all of these different bodies to work together in the most effective manner.

This capability has developed in two separate areas – pre-incident planning focusing on resilience, business continuity, etc , and post-incident emergency response capability.

In the years since 9.11, these different bodies have had innumerable exercises, at all levels of operation, which means that whenever there have been the need for coordinated response, whether it has been because of accidents (train crashes, motorway closures, bridge collapses), natural incidents (storms, flooding, snow), or terrorism (bombs), there has been a well-practiced process that all interested groups are aware of and comfortable in carrying out.

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