

AVIATION ^{FI326} security *international*

The Journal of Airport & Airline Security

APRIL 2003 : Volume 9 Issue 2

GRL781

LV224



BA074

Davao Airport Bomb

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Hong Kong & Manila* RK595

On The Horizon:
avsec technologies for tomorrow

Disruptive Passenger Management:
options for restraint

ID Card Issuance:
staff vetting and airport identification

Crew Personal Security:
from hotel theft to drug rape



War in Iraq: heightened concerns yet frozen budgets

by Philip Baum

It was one of those moments when one knows that one is viewing history in the making. The statue of Saddam Hussein in central Baghdad was pulled to the ground by US forces cheered on by jubilant Iraqis able to openly express their sentiments towards their governing regime for the first time in more than a quarter of a century. I sat in my hotel room in Dubai trying to take in the enormity of the moment. The war was not over. That, said commentators and politicians alike, could take many more days or even weeks.

I fear, however, for the aviation security community, the dramatic images from Iraq beamed to the world on 9 April 2003 were cause for considerable concern. Our battle will not go on for only days or weeks, but for years. One battle won is far from game, set and match.

Let's face it. In Iraq, the coalition picked the next easy target after Afghanistan. It used the excuse of hidden weapons of mass destruction to carry out this war of liberation. Saddam Hussein was almost universally despised internationally and few, given his secular approach to Islam, in the Arab world cared much for him or his regime. Not that I opposed the war. I am tentatively delighted at the removal of this despot and, given the death toll at the time of writing (11 April), it has probably saved far more lives than it has taken.

War in Iraq, however, would not have been an option were it not for the tragic events of 11 September. Bush Junior, we should remember, was elected (well, sort of) on the basis of his desire to concentrate more on domestic US issues. How quickly that policy changed. The appetite for retribution in the American establish-

ment is now strong and the world's number one policeman is back on the beat.

The pretext for this war was, however, flawed, especially if it took 11 September to make it a reality. If this were a war of liberation, as is now being touted, then there an awful lot of regimes across the African and Asian continents who ought to be very worried. If it were a war on terrorism then more than a handful of other states are likely to be next in the firing line, unless America's thirst has been sated. And, if it were anything to do with al Qaeda, and groups of that ilk, then we missed the target totally and the governments of Iran, Syria and Pakistan must be counting their lucky stars, there being home to so many of their activists.

It is important to recognise that, despite the victory celebrations in the streets of Baghdad, the site of the American and British military invading Arab soil, and winning, does not augur well for the future. I doubt the sentiments expressed in the streets of Amman, Cairo and Teheran will change significantly. For al Qaeda, not only are US forces "soiling" the holy land of Saudi Arabia, they have now taken control of the birthplace of civilisation. Small wonder that Osama bin Laden is urging for more and more suicidal attacks. Furthermore, in their eyes, the west is guilty of double standards, as peace and nationhood for the Palestinian people seem an unlikely reality.

So we need to brace ourselves and not be complacent as a result of short-term victories. There is every indication that hijacking is on the increase again. In the last two months alone, there have been six hijacks or hijack attempts. True, three

incidents (two in Cuba and one in Macao) were perpetrated by asylum seekers, one by a criminal (in Australia), and one by an emotionally disturbed individual (in Turkey). There was, however, one incident carried out as a protest against the war in Iraq by a Turkish national in Istanbul. Moreover, whilst not hitting the western media's headlines in a big way, we should not allow ourselves to feel overly distant from the acts of sabotage committed at airports in the Philippines. One person died in a bombing in Cotabato and 22 died as a result of the landside attack in Davao; both incidents were carried out by Islamic groups. Such successes, whatever the cause, demonstrate the vulnerability of the aviation system and are likely to lead to copycat attacks, some of which may have a terrorist orientation.

Most frightening is the response from the airlines. Whilst the impending war on Iraq caused many carriers to re-evaluate their financial obligations and, in some cases, lay off staff, the one area one would have expected investment would have been in security and, in particular, security training.

Yet, crew training managers cry "no budget".

Surely this is the time to be sending out the message that we take security seriously. That is a message that needs to be read not only by the terrorist groups who wish to target our industry but to our aircrews who put themselves at risk each time they take to the skies.

I could be accused of sour grapes as many readers will be aware that crew security training is also my livelihood and that cancelled orders rarely please any business. I accept that that is partly true, but I

cannot sit here in silence as I watch multi-millions being frittered away on screening systems whilst airlines are failing to make an investment of a few thousand dollars to educate their crew.

Training time on security is woefully inadequate, yet the cost of such neglect could be astronomical. Forget terrorism for a moment and concentrate on disruptive passengers and those who have psychological problems – passengers that any airline can transport and to which threat no carrier can claim immunity. At most 8 hours training is afforded crew. 4 hours is the norm. 2 hours often the reality. And, some still adopt the shove-in-a-video technique.


Yet, I visit numerous airlines who most proudly demonstrate their cabin simulators or mock ups used for service and safety training. I, as a frequent flier, am relieved that safety issues are taken so seriously. It does however anger me that security is not granted the same respect. After all, when was the last time that an airliner ditched at sea and the cabin crew successfully carried out an evacuation in accordance with

procedures? Makes you think. Most SEP trainers actually cannot remember a single incident. Yet, on every flight the crew systematically brief us on use of life jackets and escape routes. Hijackings take place, on average, twice per month. Remember that there have been six in the last two months alone. And, disruptive passenger incidents are a daily occurrence.

To airline management who read this, I would plead with you to take the security threat seriously. It's all too easy to claim compliance with national legislation. Take the time to look at what your crews are actually being taught and how effective that training really is. If you think that, despite the conflicts taking place around the globe, you are not exposed to the threat of international terrorism, at least focus on the disruptive passenger issue. And, if you are thinking of an economic argument against it, perhaps you should also calculate the cost of one flight diversion....

Whilst coalition forces are waging a war of liberation on Iraqi soil, our flight crews are waging a daily war against terror in the

skies. It may seem a strange comparison to make, but think again. Coalition pretexts for waging this war were to eradicate weapons of mass destruction, liberate a nation and send a clear message to other regimes that there is a new world order. It was, in reality, also fought for economic interests. We too wish to neutralise potential weapons of mass destruction, inspire confidence in the travelling public, and offer genuine security combined with a clear deterrent. The economic factor is actually also an argument for expenditure rather than budget freezes. We are still reeling from the last big attack, but the cost to us of another would be catastrophic.

During the first Gulf War, 12 years ago, we failed to finish the job and had to wage it again. In aviation, let's not postpone the issues that need to be addressed today. It offers no guarantees, but it's a lot better than adopting the head-in-the-sand approach utilised by those governments who viewed the Iraqi conflict in terms of short-term economic gains rather than long-term security. N'est pas? 

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