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international

The Journal of Airport & Airline Security

APRIL 2004 : Volume 10 Issue 2



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Surface-to-Air Missiles:
assessing the threat

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asking aircrew to be lawyers

Regional Carriers:
security dilemmas

Feeling Secure:
a passenger perspective

Handling the Media in a Crisis:
quenching the thirst of the press

St. Petersburg:

leading the way in
thermal neutron analysis

ISSN 352-0148 USPS 010-807



IT'S A SAD SAD WORLD

On 11 March 2004 more than 200 residents of Madrid awoke, got dressed and left their homes to take trains to the city. Some took their children to nursery or school en route, whilst others bade their family farewell at the door for what they presumed would be "just another day at the office". They set out upon what was to be their final journey...

As the news filtered through, few, beyond Spanish borders, had any doubt that Al Qaeda had struck again. Once again multiple targets were hit simultaneously. Once again the number of casualties was astronomical. Once again they had caught us off guard.

Whilst we puzzled over misleading intelligence pertaining to potential attacks on commercial aviation, the enemy demonstrated its prowess and managed not only to inflict carnage on the unsuspecting population of Madrid, but also to achieve regime change in doing so.

As I wrote in the last issue, we would be foolish to ignore intelligence chatter, but the message we send out to our front line troops – the security screeners, cabin crew, check-in agents and ground handlers – must be to maintain our vigilance against all threats at all times. I am reminded of the words of Sidney Chau, former General Manager of AVSECO in Hong Kong: "we need to maintain a sense of crisis 24/7".

Intelligence works. The British authorities have successfully prevented at least one terrorist outrage by effecting Operation Crevice in which they carried out raids on properties across the South East of the United Kingdom, arresting several terrorist suspects in the process and recovering half a tonne of ammonium nitrate fertiliser. The Filipino authorities have also managed to prevent a similar attack on Metro Manila. Yet, whilst we

must delight in such achievements we must also heed the now infamous words of the IRA in the aftermath of their failed attempt to kill Prime Minister Thatcher in Brighton, "Today we were unlucky, but remember we only have to be lucky once. You will have to be lucky always".

One only has to look at events around the world to realise that the challenge facing us is enormous. We are going to need a lot of luck. There are going to be plenty of excuses for further terrorist atrocities. And, given the dramatic effect the Madrid bombings seemed to have on the election result in Spain, the perpetrators will be all the more eager to utilise such tactics to attain their "goals". Terrorism, it would seem, works.

In the Western media considerable attention is paid to news stories that directly affect Western populations and their financial interests. As a result much of the world's terrorist activity goes either

Or how about Nepal? Civil unrest is now commonplace with Maoist rebels, who are aiming to topple the monarchy, engaged in terrorist activity that has included the targeting of civil aviation facilities. They have, in March alone, bombed the air traffic control tower in Meghauli airport and attempted to bomb Simara airport. Fortunately, there, all nine explosive devices were found by the Nepalese authorities.

Spain was not the only place in which the railways have been targeted recently. In France a bomb containing nitrate fuel (ANFO), several detonators and a timer was found on the line linking Paris to the Swiss city of Basel. An extortionist group, known as AZF, is believed to be behind the attack.

News emanating from Russia is far from encouraging with reports indicating that the Riyadus-Salikhin Martyrs Brigade, a Chechen group, is threatening chemical attacks across Russia in retaliation for

"Combat chemical agents, toxins and different poisons are being used against us. Therefore we reserve the right to use chemical and poisonous substances this year."

Shamil Basayev, Chechen former hijacker

unreported or unnoticed. Many of these incidents involve aviation.

Take India, for example, where the authorities have recently arrested militants who were planning a suicidal attack at Indira Ghandi International Airport in New Delhi. Supposedly Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, a terrorist organisation based in Pakistan, was behind the plot.

the killing of former rebel leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev in Qatar in February. The group's leader, Shamil Basayev, a former aircraft hijacker released by the Turkish authorities, has ominously stated on the internet that, "Combat chemical agents, toxins and different poisons are being used against us. Therefore we reserve the right to use chemical and poisonous substances this year." Basayev indicates that Russians overseas are his prime targets.

Meanwhile in Thailand, where the authorities fear imminent action by Islamic separatists based in the south of the country, the theft of 1,300 kilograms of ammonium nitrate, 58 sticks of dynamite and 170 blasting caps has done little to allay their fears.

In Uzbekistan tens of people have now been killed in suicidal attacks, a modus operandi that is spreading at a terrifying rate. Aviation has not been the target there, but we must surely add the word "yet".

Whilst many in the security services may view Israel's assassination of Hamas' spiritual leader, Ahmed Yassin, as something of a coup, others are somewhat more wary about the nett result. British Foreign Secretary, Jack Shaw, condemned the attack, presumably in an attempt to deter any act of revenge being perpetrated against the United Kingdom. If that were not the reason, and even if it is, then Shaw is guilty of double standards of the highest order. Hamas has, since September 2000, perpetrated 425 terrorist attacks, of which 52 were of a suicidal nature.

Whilst Yassin may have been a worthy target for the War on Terror, the fact that his death was the result of an Israeli strike has no doubt added to Western fears of even more brutal terrorist reprisals. After all, that is what has been promised.

This depressing glimpse at the world illustrates mere examples of the threats we are up against.

Traditional terrorist activity still persists. In Colombia, for example, kidnappings are still commonplace. In March alone, parachutists were abducted at an airport and 12 people on a boat trip have also ended up as hostages to the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), let alone numerous bombings in population centres.

So too, and much more common, are the actions of those for whom criminal intent or anti-social behaviour are the order of the day. Take the Leap Year's Day example of the man, later named as Paul Blatchley, who crashed his dark blue Dodge Durango SUV through the security barricades at Kahului on the Hawaiian island of Maui. The vehicle ended up in the open-air ticket counter area, alongside the United Airlines

"On Leap Year's Day Paul Blatchley crashed his Dodge Durango through the security barricades at Kahului airport."

check-in. Blatchley then simply got out of the SUV and set fire to the gasoline that he had poured over the seats. The terminal, which had suffered significant fire damage, was closed for nearly 10 hours. But what if it had been a terrorist attack?

Kahului probably did not expect itself to be high on the list of being the target of a security incident, in the same way that Qantas wouldn't have expected their flight from Melbourne to Launceston last May to have been the subject of a suicidal hijacking. Both incidents, however, go to prove that there is no airport or airline that can afford to take chances when it comes to security.

Security operatives have to remain on guard against all manner of threats. These are exceptionally dangerous times. It is a sad sad world. ■

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