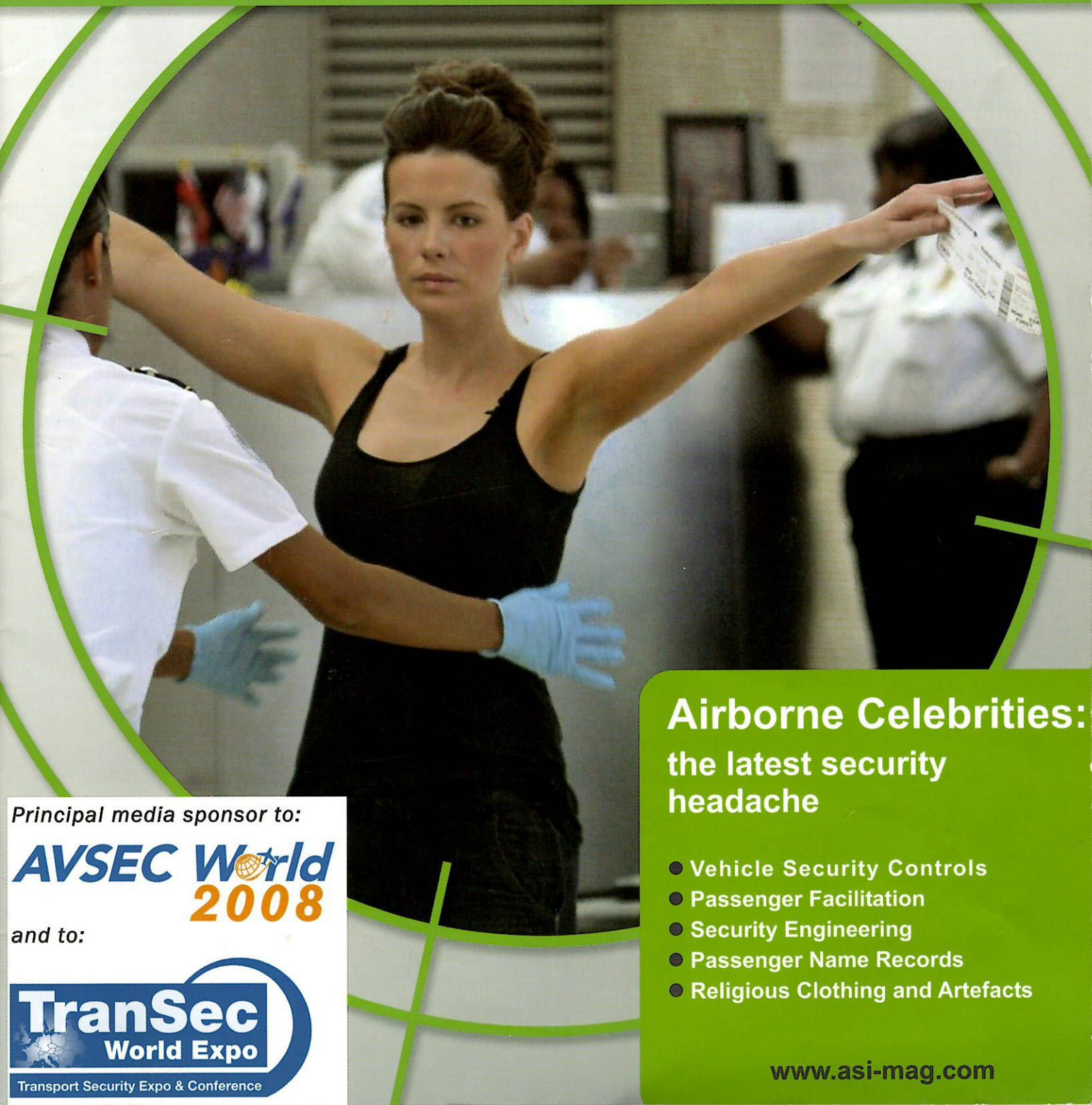


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Trains, Buses & Ships Under Attack: avsec in perspective

by Philip Baum



One would have thought, based on media coverage and technological investment, that the aviation sector of the transportation industry was subjected to far more attacks than its maritime, rail and road transportation counterparts. There's nothing like an aviation disaster or security glitch to pique the general public's interest. As such, our natural fears of defying the laws of gravity and taking to the skies inside aluminium tubes are exacerbated by the concern that we may fall victim to the actions of terrorists, criminals and the insane.

We have long argued that aviation will remain the number one target of international terrorism, but whether that it is truly the case is questionable. For sure it guarantees headline news and international coverage yet, perhaps in tribute to our security efforts, the number of actual incidents pails into insignificance in comparison to the frequent attacks against other modes of transport.

Of course, an asylum seeker may need the cross-border capability of an aircraft and the unruly passenger poses a greater threat at 11,000 metres than on a public bus, but the ease with which the rail, maritime and city transportation systems can be hit is the security consultant's nightmare. All alone on the high seas, traversing bridges on two metal rails or boarding the unscreened masses onto city centre buses make protecting aviation seem like child's play.

We are often living in blissful ignorance as to the frequency of terrorist attacks our counterparts face, let alone the resulting death toll. Acts of maritime piracy are rarely reported, yet on the rise. The coasts of Somalia and Nigeria and the open seas of the Southeast Asia are the bounty hunters playground. The railroads of India and Pakistan and the downtown public buses of Sri Lanka and the Philippines are frequently targeted by internationally renowned terrorist organisations.

Let's take a look at the last two-month period as an example.

MARITIME

Many security pundits have predicted that cruise liners are a natural target for international terrorism. Like aviation, they carry a multi-national payload and unlike the container ships, they have media appeal, being full of holiday-makers travelling for the sake of relaxation rather than simply to get from point A to point B. A 21st Century Achille Lauro hijacking, or worse, is a distinct possibility and the vulnerability of the maritime industry has been demonstrated all too often in recent weeks. Indeed, in the first quarter of 2008 there were 49 incidents of piracy world-wide, compared to 41 last year. It's a growing scourge.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the Tamil Tigers), who have been fighting since 1983 to create an independent homeland for ethnic-minority Tamils in Sri Lanka and who have been one of the world's premier proponents of suicide bombing, have targeted the Sri Lankan navy.

On 10th May, it is thought that a suicide diver managed to bomb and sink a navy cargo ship in the port of Trincomalee. Whilst the vessel was empty, the attack demonstrated the potential of underwater suicidal attacks. A month later, on 11th June, six boats of the Sea Tigers, the naval wing of the Tamil Tigers, attacked a Sri Lankan naval detachment, killing three navy personnel and wounding others. Four of the guerrillas died in the attack.

With fuel prices already an international concern, any incident jeopardising the safe shipment of oil has the potential to have global impact. On 21st April the Takayama was fired upon by a small boat off the coast of Yemen whilst it was en route to Yanbu, Saudi Arabia, to load crude oil. Whilst nobody was injured, a hole was made in the fuel tank.

The maritime threat is not only terrorist-orientated. April drew to a close with a number of acts of maritime piracy. On 25th April, eight armed pirates in Malaysian waters attacked a Thai oil tanker, the Patarvarin II, carrying jet fuel bound for Phuket, Thailand. Reaching the vessel by

speedboat, the pirates stole the crew's money before making their escape.

Somali waters are some of the most dangerous in the world, with more than twenty acts of piracy having taken place in 2008 to date. In April a French luxury yacht, Le Ponant, and its crew of 30 were held captive for a week until the French security forces managed to arrest their captors. Then, a Spanish tuna fishing boat, the Playa de Bakio, was seized off the Somali coast by four pirates armed with grenade launchers. And, on 17th May, a Jordanian cargo ship, the MV Victoria, which was carrying humanitarian aid in the form of 4,200 metric tonnes of bagged sugar donated by Denmark to Somalia was hijacked in the same area. A week later, a Dutch vessel sailing under the Panamanian flag, the MV Amiya Scan, was also hijacked near Somalia whilst en route from Kenya to Romania.

Even ships performing security duties have been targeted. On 9th June, a ship escorting oil industry vessels to oil production sites in southern Nigeria was hijacked and eight naval officers were taken hostage.

And, just as this issue was going to press, news emerged that the MV Hereford Express, which transports livestock from Western Australia to South-East Asia, was attacked by armed men on speedboats after it set sail for the Australian port of Broome. Nobody was hurt, but the vessel had to return to the Philippines having been badly damaged.

Meanwhile, ports themselves are also vulnerable. On 4th June, three delivery trucks were burned by suspected members of the New People's Army at the port in Escalante City, Philippines.

RAIL

To some, the concept of terror on board the railroads may seem the stuff of an Agatha Christie novel or Wild West movie. To the residents of India and Pakistan, it is almost daily reality.

On 13th April, six people were killed and four others seriously injured when over 100 armed

Naxalites (Maoist rebels) attacked a police station at Jhajha railway station on the Patna-Howrah mainline in Bihar, raiding it for arms and ammunition and then setting off an explosive charge. A couple of days later, the Naxalites blew up a two-metre stretch of track in Giridih, Jharkhand.

In Turkey, members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (the PKK) were prevented from detonating a device at a train station in southeast Turkey, the very area the PKK wishes to gain self-rule in. Two of their operatives were found carrying explosives on 17th April. Yet, on 24th May, the PKK succeeded in detonating a device near a track elsewhere in the region, derailing five carriages in the process.

Insurgents have also regularly targeted Southern Thailand. Albeit not making the international headlines, reports indicate that more than 3,000 people have been killed in the region since the unrest began in January 2004. 13 people were injured on 20th April when a bomb, hidden in a rubbish bin in front of a state railway employee's home, was detonated remotely by mobile phone.

In Pakistan, an attempt to blow up a railway track linking Quetta with Iran was prevented when an EOD team made safe a 32kg remote-control device placed on the tracks on 24th April. But, on 29th May, a railway bridge in Baluchistan province was successfully blown up, causing the suspension of rail services between Quetta, the provincial capital and rest of the country.

The exposure of railway tracks was further demonstrated in Ireland when a suspect device was found on 8th May on the Belfast to Dublin line. It too was rendered safe. And, if you think 32kgs is significant, members of the Hells Angels were arrested in Malmo, Sweden, putting 70kgs of dynamite into a baggage locker at a train station on 5th June!

Far more deadly was the 26th May Tamil Tiger attack on a Sri Lankan train in which eight people were killed, including one pregnant woman, and more than 70 wounded. Tamil Tigers, currently targeting ships, buses and trains, also wounded 27 people on 4th June when they detonated a device on the tracks in a suburb of Colombo.

In Algeria, it is thought that "al Qaeda in Islamic North Africa" is responsible for two bomb blasts at railways stations in Beni Amrane, some 60 miles east of Algiers, in which two people were killed. The second device was timed to detonate as security forces and rescue workers arrived at the scene of the first blast.

BUS

The challenge of securing public bus services is all the more arduous, especially in Sri Lanka where the Tamil Tigers are thought to be behind a string of deadly incidents.

- 25th April: 24 killed and 40 wounded when a crowded bus was blown up in a Colombo suburb.
- 16th May: 10 killed and 95 wounded when a suicide bomber rammed his motorbike into a bus.
- 31st May: Two killed and eight injured in a grenade attack
- 6th June: 22 people killed and 84 wounded in two separate bus bombings in Colombo and Polgolla.

It's hardly surprising to find Iraq and Afghanistan on the incident list. Three people were killed and six wounded in Baghdad on 24th May when a device that had been strapped to the back of a bus detonated. And, on 27th May in Farah (Afghanistan), eight bus passengers were killed when a roadside bomb exploded.

In Moscow, two people were injured on 25th May when an explosion took place on a city-centre bus.

Last, but by no means least, Nepal. On 27th May, just after the new assembly had been sworn in, thereby ending 200 years of monarchy and declaring the country a republic, a group threw a bomb at a Kathmandu bus stop which detonated, injuring six people. The perpetrators, according to police reports, were likely to be members of the GPF Ranvir Sena group.

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