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Zamboanga City Bombing: 2010's Daallo Airlines Moment?

by Philip Baum

On 13th November 2009, the world paid scant attention to the arrest of a 35-year old Somali man, Abdi Hassan Abdi, who was the last passenger in line wishing to board a Daallo Airlines flight from Mogadishu to the northern Somali city of Hargeisa, with onward connections to Djibouti and Dubai. In his possession was a syringe with a green liquid inside, a plastic bag containing 600 grams of ammonium nitrate and half a litre of concentrated sulphuric acid in a plastic bottle; allegedly, when they were discovered at security screening (a notably impressive find in my view), the passenger then attempted to pay a bribe in order to be able to continue on his way. Although the African nation's authorities recognised that this was an innovative, yet potentially effective way, of infiltrating an explosive device onto an aircraft, most of the rest of the world were either oblivious to the occurrence or readily dismissed it as being of little relevance to the global aviation industry.

Some six weeks later, the newswires were burning in the aftermath of Abdulmutallab's attempt to destroy a Northwest flight en route from Amsterdam to Detroit using a similar device. This was now a significant incident as it impacted a flight operating between The Netherlands and the United States. Underpants were headline news, body scanners the order of the day...

We ignore incidents such as that perpetrated by Abdi Hassan Abdi at our peril. Not only is it offensive to the developing world to downplay incidents that take place in such regions, it is also short-sighted. Indeed, these are the very incidents that we ought to be focussing our attention on as they are the test sites, selected as they do not appear on our radar screens and specifically because we fail to appreciate

their consequences. There is a lack of clarity as to whether the Somali attack is actually linked to that of Christmas Day, but it matters little – copycat or coordinated, co-trained or lone wolves, the creative way of concealing IEDs was being demonstrably appreciated by those we are supposed to guard ourselves from.

When reports surface of stowaways managing to clamber into wheel wells for free flights that are likely to end in death by freezing or crushing, we are often intrigued by the human story that pushes someone to take such extreme steps. On 6 June this year a Romanian actually survived a 97-minute flight from Vienna to London beneath a private B-747! A month later, on 10 July, a Lebanese man was less fortunate and did not survive the journey in a wheel well of a Nas Air flight from Beirut to Riyadh. Whilst both incidents imply human tragedies for the two 20-year old "passengers" involved, we must concentrate on the fact that both airport and airline security measures were being shown to fail. All the investment in screening technologies means little if our restricted zones can be so readily accessed.

Of even greater concern is the risk to human life within the public areas of our airport terminals where the post-liquid plot security lines have presented the terrorist with the perfect target – lots of bodies accessible without even having to worry about being screened. This was clearly demonstrated in the Philippines as this issue of Aviation Security International was about to go to press – on 5th August, just after a Philippine Airlines flight had arrived from Manila, a bomb detonated outside the arrivals area at Zamboanga City International Airport killing two people, including the man carrying the device.

Initial suspicions were that a suicide bomber had detonated his deadly load (a mixture of ammonium nitrate and kerosene) in an attempt to assassinate Governor Abdusakur Tan, who was one of 24 people injured in the attack and who had been a target for assassination a year ago. However it later emerged that Reynaldo Apilado, who was carrying the backpack containing the explosives, might have actually been duped into carrying the device. Hatimil Haron Yacob, who was the other fatality, was Apilado's neighbour and was alongside him when the detonation occurred. According to police reports, following their reviews of the airport's CCTV footage, neither Apilado's nor Yacob's demeanours indicated that they were on a suicide mission.

It is all too easy to mark this incident as a non-event in a regional airport in south east Asia. Mistake. Firstly, what happens in the Philippines can impact the global stage – it was there, in 1994, that Ramzi Youssef tested his liquid, X-ray-detection proof, bomb as a pre-cursor to Oplan Bojinka (the plan to blow up twelve aircraft operating flights from Asia to the United States in January 1995). Secondly, even if the recent Zamboanga attack had nothing to do with the actions of an internationally-minded terrorist organisation, such as Philippines-based Abu Sayyaf, lessons need to be learned.

Much of the training that airports and security agencies provide their staff in suicide bomber identification is based on the fact that there will be behavioural indicators. Pre-Zamboanga we had worried about the mule (duped individual) being used to infiltrate a device onto an aircraft; post-Zamboanga we need to remind ourselves that such people can be used to target airports too.

What happens in Zamboanga today, as was the case in Mogadishu in 2009, can happen anywhere else tomorrow...