



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (08/2004)

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## COUNTERING THE THREAT OF LAND TRANSPORT TERROR

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The terrorist bombings of four trains in Madrid on 11 March 04 have sparked intense public discussion about the vulnerability of land transport and generated a wide array of ideas for strengthening the security of commuters in large cities. The disruption of a similar attempt against rail stations and shopping malls in Manila on 30 March has brought the threat of such terrorist attacks nearer home. Indeed Singapore security authorities and MRT operators have announced a multi-million dollar plan to beef up security measures and surveillance capabilities of the island's MRT rail network.

In the wake of the Madrid bombings most of the suggestions have essentially duplicated the measures that have been implemented over the past 30 years to strengthen the security of civil aviation. These have consisted mainly of installing metal detectors, x-ray machines and vapour detectors, securing perimeter fencing around airports and the deterrent presence of armed guards and sniffer dogs, etc.

However it is clear that such measures are not an option for securing land transport targets such as MRT and buses, for several reasons. Firstly the sheer number of bus and train stops where potential attackers could board is incomparably greater than the number of boarding gates at airport, making the implementing of even basic screening procedures for land transport a prohibitively expensive proposition. Secondly, while compulsory airport taxes paid by passengers can aid in financing the security of civil aviation, the low fare of a bus or metro ride renders impossible the application of such efforts for land transport. Thirdly, the idea of daily commute being prolonged by an hour or more at queues at screening stations would not be acceptable to a majority of the people. Finally, even if all the above obstacles were somehow overcome the ease with which mass casualty and destruction can be caused by dual-use items makes the prospects of averting acts of terror uncertain. Consider last year's arson attack on the Seoul subway by a mentally disturbed man who killed 192 persons using only a paper milk container filled with petrol and a cigarette lighter. Clearly no system is fool-proof and whatever measures are eventually put in place the public will inevitably have to accept a significant level of risk.

Before discussing what can be done it will be instructive to examine the nature of recent attacks against land transport and the reasons they are chosen over other potential targets. According to a study done in 1996 about a third of all terrorist acts worldwide involved transport targets. The tactics used to attack public transport also reflected the full range of terrorists' arsenal: bombings, arson, sabotage, hostage taking, dispersal of biological and chemical agents, roadside ambushes and assaults with standoff weapons; all have been used in attacks on land transport. These attacks were carried out by Sikh terrorists in India in 1985, using booby-trap transistor radios in buses which killed 84 persons; the Irish republicans in the 1990's, terrorising commuters in Britain by planting 81 explosive devices on the

underground and railway cars; and the Aum Shin Rikyo cult attempting to release toxic nerve gases, sarin, hydrogen cyanide and botulinum, on subway trains in Japanese cities on eight occasions in 1995, in one instance killing 12 and injuring 1040 persons in Tokyo. The Algerian GIA spread terror in France with a wave of bombings in the Paris metro the same year. And in one of the most frightening trends in terrorism, suicide bombers have killed scores of people in buses in Israel and more recently, on the Russian metro.

Terrorists chose to attack land transport for several reasons. The first advantage is the panic-spreading ubiquity of the city bus or metro which reinforces the perception among the civilian population that anyone using public transport could become a victim of the next terror attack. Secondly, land transport provides the terrorists with a high concentration of people in a confined space, creating a mass casualty environment. It's been documented that attacks against land transport targets have been nearly twice as lethal as terror attacks overall. Thirdly, a terror campaign targeting commuter transport can deter people from everyday travel, and have a profound economic impact by crippling the mobility of the work force and scaring away investors and tourists. Fourthly, continuous attacks against such frequently-used means of transport can severely undermine a government's authority as the populace grows increasingly frustrated over time, eventually blaming the government for its inability to maintain order. Fifthly, terrorists pick land transport targets because they are an essential feature of large population centres and thus represent in the mind of the terrorist the heart of the enemy. And finally unlike civil aviation land transport is a soft target that provides the terrorists with an almost infinite number of options for operations with a high probability of success and low level of risk. In short, commuter transport is an attractive terrorist target; that is a reality that is unlike to change soon.

### **How to counter terrorist attacks**

Nevertheless the experiences of countries that have had terror attacks against land transport provide useful lessons for countering them. In this context it is a combination of several measures that helped the authorities cope with the threat. On the prevention side the deterrent presence of armed guards and dogs at critical interchanges, the high level of awareness and courage of land transport staff, and the heightened vigilance of the public, had succeeded in thwarting a large number of terrorist attacks.

No less important has been the role of effective response and timely mitigation once attacks do occur. Fast and efficient medical response saves lives, efficacious forensic procedures can aid timely identification and apprehension of the perpetrators, and returning the lives of people back to normal as soon as possible help in ameliorating the effects of terror. Mitigation is probably the most crucial aspect of effectively countering transport terror.

Terrorism is essentially a psychological mind game, the objective of which it to create the universal perception of vulnerability that is quite disproportionate to the actual level of threat. From a terrorist's strategic perspective the killings are secondary to the spread of panic. It is crucial to recognise that by living in fear and uncertainty we help satisfy the terrorist's key objective. This is not to suggest that we should not take all reasonable preventive measures to improve our security; but it would be unwise to think that we can ever fully eliminate all of the weak spots of soft targets such as land transport. Terrorists will always find ways to attack. It is thus our preparedness to deal with the reality of living with terrorism that should form our most important line of defence. Terrorism will only work as far as we allow it to work.

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