

Capacity-Building for Combating Terrorism

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Terrorism is an environmental hazard much like other hazards. While the hazard has some unique sociopolitical characteristics, it can be addressed in much the same way as other hazards are addressed--through thorough hazard analysis, risk assessment, and the development of mitigation and preparedness strategies. Building technical, administrative, and political capacities to respond and recover from future terrorist incidences is essential. Building capacities from the community level up is critical.

As the events of September 11th demonstrated, terrorism can take many forms. In many respects, the disasters in New York City and Washington were similar to other kinds of disasters. They involved structural collapses, aircraft crashes, hazardous materials releases, and a multitude of secondary impacts similar to those found in natural and technological disasters. The scale of the disasters, in particular, was similar to a large natural or technological disaster. The major differences were that (1) the disaster site was a crime scene, which complicated the response, and (2) the disaster was a purposive act of man and, therefore, it had greater psychological impact on victims and spectators than an "act of God" or accident of man. Indeed, the attacks were calculated to maximize their psychological impact.

Despite those important differences, the disaster responses were conducted much like those involved in natural and technological disasters. First responders rushed to the scene, incident command structures were set up, EOCs were activated, resources were marshaled and staged, and the needs of victims were addressed. The capacities of local first responders were critical and the resources of national emergency management networks were essential. While law enforcement and military units were very much involved in securing the sites, the emergency management effort took on familiar shapes. The effectiveness of the response was testament to the fact that we do have a functioning national emergency management system.

One of the most important lessons of September 11th was that, while some potential acts of terrorism can be prevented and some risks can be mitigated, some terrorists will be successful. That conclusion is based upon the fact that terrorism has been with us for millennia. Moreover, while the weapons of choice may be chemical weapons, biological weapons, radiological material, nuclear weapons, or explosive devices, much less sophisticated weapons can be found. Terrorists may cause more aviation crashes, dam or other structural failures, hazardous materials spills, public health emergencies, and so on.

Perhaps the most important lesson from September 11th is that the hazard posed by terrorism is a law enforcement problem and a military problem and a public health problem. It may also be a socioeconomic problem like our earlier experiences with terrorist violence. And, it is certainly an economic problem. To be managed, the hazard of terrorism must be addressed broadly and the "all-hazards" model may be the

best framework for that effort. Certainly the mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery functions cover a broad spectrum of activities that can reduce the risk and deal with the consequences of future terrorist acts.