WATCHLINE

September 21, 2017

London Commuters Escape Devastation As Bomb Mechanism Fails – A "bucket" bomb placed on a commuter train during rush hour last Friday morning, with a destructive potentially greater than that of the 2005 7/7 Underground bombs, apparently initiated, but failed to detonate. At least thirty people were injured due to the fireball that erupted in the subway car at Parsons Green. In all, six men—17, 18, 21, 25, 30, and 48—have been arrested in connection to the attack, which ISIS has since claimed credit. An initial bang was heard prior to the flaming, but a plastic bucket—presumably packed with explosives—inside a shopping bag remained intact and social media video showed it still burning, along with a strand of Christmas-style lights hanging off (sometimes used as a detonator).

Assessment: A timer found on the device may indicate that the explosion was planned for a busier station down the line, and, more clearly, that the perpetrator left it behind rather than carrying out a suicide mission. One bomb disposal expert said there are strong similarities to the failed devices in the attempted 21/7 bombings, two weeks after 7/7, which was less known due to the lack of casualties, but shows that it is important not to dismiss such plots. The Times Square bombing attempt in 2010, for example, was a another learning opportunity. Areas in or around train hubs are perennial targets.

Scores of Buildings Collapse during 7.1 Quake in Mexico City – For the second time in two weeks, a powerful earthquake south of Mexico City has struck the sprawling metropolis region, however the damage and death toll this time around are significantly higher. On Sept. 7, a magnitude-8.1 quake rocked Mexico, but the brunt of the damage was felt in the less populated southern part of the country. The magnitude-7.1 that struck Tuesday was centered about 80 miles southeast of the capital, causing "severe and sustained shaking," resulting in the collapse of over 50 buildings in the city alone, and more than a hundred deaths regionally. From local to international, members from urban search and rescue units continue operations. Tuesday's earthquake occurred on the same date (September 19) as an infamous 1985 quake that killed thousands in the city.

Assessment: Much of the damage occurred in buildings that were spared in 1985, leaving many residents with a false sense of security, however the differing nature of the two episodes caused taller building to fall in the former and shorter (and older) ones to give way this time. In both cases, the shaking is magnified by the soft (lakebed) soil on which much of the city is built, which may increase the effects by 100 times. In '85, what is considered a "megathrust," the quake was caused by the subduction shift of one tectonic plate (oceanic) below another (continental), impacted taller buildings more than shorter ones. This time, the quake was shallow, taking place within the upper tectonic plate. As with hurricanes, there are many more factors involved in damage than the raw scale (Richter/magnitude) measurement, including specifics of the event parameters and point(s) of impact.

U.S. College Students Attacked with Acid in France – Four female Boston College students studying abroad were sprayed with hydrochloric acid in the French port city of Marseille at the Saint-Charles train station Monday by a woman not believed to have extremist views. Two of the four were injured in the incident and posted to social media later that day that they were both "anticipating a quick recovery," and forgive the attacker who they believe to be "mentally unstable." According to French police, the woman justified her actions by relating that she herself had been a victim of an acid attack.

Assessment: Acid attacks are typically used as a tactic to terrify women and young girls in hardline Islamist areas, specifically related to education, where those perpetrators, such as Taliban, are opposed to girls attending school. According to the website islamichelp.org, these attacks are perpetrated "more often than not" by spouses or family members. However, a recent spate in London has included men as victims. One other trend to consider, regarding this attack, is the sheer number of U.S. students studying abroad in any given year. A recent tally showed the number to be in excess of 300,000, more than half in Europe, followed by Asia, and Latin America. With increasing terror attacks in Europe, and Americans a prized target, safety provided by colleges and universities of origin is imperative, but, as seen in this attack, Americans will not always be in secure perimeters.

Maria Slashes Across Puerto Rico; All Without Power – The most powerful hurricane to make landfall in Puerto Rico in over 80 years tore a wide swath of total devastation across the U.S. island territory, crossing southeast to northwest with winds of 155 mph Wednesday. One hundred percent of the island's 3.5 million residents are without power, and some are saying it could be months before it is restored. The death toll is uncertain, as communication with the first-hit southeast had yet to be established, but on nearby Domenica, 14 were killed as Maria moved across as a Cat. 5 storm. Aid from the U.S. mainland will be critical as many are without (electricity-dependent) water amid vast destruction and severed infrastructure.

Assessment: In the U.S. Virgin Islands, St. Croix, largely spared by Irma earlier this month compared to St. Thomas and St. John, was also directly impacted by Maria. St. Croix, was a staging area for relief efforts to the other two, and many supplies were already sent along. Some rescue task force members were still in place in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands from Irma. Others are bouncing from one place to another, and with multiple hurricanes (and earthquakes), as well as western wildfires, resources are stretched thin. Responders need to adhere to a high degree of preparedness, including an ability to withstand additional events. In 2005, FDNY members deployed to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina as the more powerful Rita grazed to the west.

Fentanyl Busts Continue in NYC; Equivalent to 32 Million Overdoses – In the latest opioid-related arrests in NYC, 195 pounds of fentanyl (street value $30 million) was netted in two busts. "The sheer volume of fentanyl pouring into the city is shocking," said NYC's narcotics prosecutor. "It's not only killing a record number of people in New York City, but the city is used as a hub of regional distribution for a lethal substance that is taking thousands of lives throughout the Northeast." The first raid occurred in early August in Kew Gardens, Queens (and is the city's largest fentanyl bust with a 140-pound seizure). The second occurred in the Bronx on Sept. 5 after DEA agents got a warrant to search a duffel bag being transported.

Assessment: Fentanyl is 50 times stronger than heroin, and is part of what appears to be the worst opioid epidemic in history. According to the CDC, over 20,000 overdose deaths attributable to synthetic opioids have occurred nationally in the past twelve months. And in NYC, there was a 50 percent increase in these overdoses from Jan. 2016 to Jan. 2017 (987 to 1,478). The DEA released a "Briefing Guide for First Responders" in June detailing forms of the drug, recommendations, exposure risks and treatment, detection, and decontamination. Several responders nationwide have been exposed to opioids during arrests or other operations, and quick access to naloxone (Narcan) has made a big difference in their recoveries.

Caching Not Such a Tough Nut for Squirrels – Researchers at UC Berkley carried out a field study in their own backyard by observing how campus squirrels stash their nuts, which can total 10,000 a year (per squirrel!). What the research team found was that the squirrels organize their many nut caches by variety and quality. The study explained how the squirrels use "chunking," a term to describe how objects or information are lumped into more manageable and memorable sub-categories, to oversee their stores. The squirrels even delay eating more nutritious nut varieties until the winter months.

Assessment: With the string of hurricanes that have decimated parts of the U.S. and the Caribbean islands in the past few weeks, as well as the recent earthquake in Mexico City, continuity planning for response agencies is more important than ever. If essential supplies and resources are disrupted, Continuity of Operations Planning (COOP) should consider how much is held in reserve for use during a crisis. In NYC, after Superstorm Sandy in 2012, power was cut for many and gasoline was difficult to find, and in the more recent cyclones to hit Texas and Florida, flooding from rainfall and widespread blackouts were main issues. NYS Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services (DHSES) provides a list of COOP resources links on its website.

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