



Preparing for Reponse to a Nuclear Weapon of Mass Destruction, Are We Ready?

US Army, LTC Vance P. Visser

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In the wake of the untimely execution of an ill-coordinated response at all levels to the Hurricane Katrina devastation and destruction that rocked the Gulf Coast, it is important to examine how the United States government is organized and resourced to confront future catastrophic disasters. Hurricane Katrina, an anticipated natural disaster, clearly demonstrates the enormous complexity associated with the extensive coordination required to synchronize the efforts of local, State, and Federal governmental agencies faced with a significant crisis. In the event the crisis is an unexpected terrorist attack employing a nuclear or radiological weapon of mass destruction, the complexity of synchronizing the response effort increases exponentially. Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist's attacks, the threat that a terrorist group might detonate a dirty bomb or radiological dispersal device or improvised nuclear device in a major United States metropolitan area has received increased attention. If a radiological or improvised nuclear device attack is considered to be an imminent threat to our populace, the federal government should give increased priority to consequence management preparedness efforts and make a concerted, sustained effort to engage the public in response planning. The National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction acknowledges that nuclear, biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the possession of hostile states and terrorists represent one of the greatest security challenges facing the United States. Although extremist groups and terrorists have a wide variety of potential agents and delivery means to choose from for a chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) attack, this study focuses specifically on response capability to a radiological or nuclear WMD attack against the United States. This paper determined we must adequately prepare to overcome the complex command, control and management challenges associated with synchronizing the requisite expertise provided by numerous diverse groups of government, emergency response, law enforcement, military, medical, disaster relief, public health, mental health, and public affairs personnel. It also proposes recommendations to ensure we are prepared to provide immediate, organized, and well synchronized response to terrorist attack employing nuclear weapons of mass destruction. The full range of counterproliferation, nonproliferation, and consequence management measures must be brought to bear against the WMD terrorist threat. Together the recommendations presented in this work may enhance our level of consequence management preparedness for dealing with the terrorist employment of nuclear WMD. Since counterproliferation and nonproliferation efforts are increasingly less effective, we must convincingly demonstrate that we are ready to respond to an improvised nuclear device or radiological dispersion device attack and that such an attack will not achieve the adversarial objective of terror. Therefore, we must prepare now; we have no other alternative.

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