

Viewpoints' recent article on the use of chemical, biological and radiological (CBRN) weapons by terrorists could not have been timelier. On Monday three separate reviews of the United Kingdom's ability to prevent a major terrorist attack were published. The Government published an update to the National Security Strategy, the annual report on the CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy and a third report concerning Britain's strategies for countering the CBRN threat. The findings of these reports can be summarised accordingly:

- The UK continues to face a serious and sustained threat from terrorism. Networks and individuals that pose a terrorist threat also continue to share an ambition to cause large numbers of casualties without warning.

- Crowded places remain attractive targets for terrorists. The most recent terrorist attacks in the UK came without warning, used suicide tactics and aimed to cause the deaths of large numbers of people.

- Conventional attacks on transport systems are judged to be some of the more likely to occur.

- Some terrorist networks continue to seek and utilise chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear materials. It has been reported that al Qaeda established facilities to conduct CBRN weapons research whilst Afghanistan was still under Taliban control.

- CONTEST has identified several factors which have increased the risk that terrorists may acquire and use CBRN weapons. These include a significant increase in the illicit trafficking of radiological materials; the availability of CBRN technologies on the internet; and the acquisition by terrorists of CBRN-related material used for legitimate purposes.

- Whilst there have been very few examples of non-conventional attacks using CBRN materials, the potential scale and impact of an attack makes planning for them an imperative.

Lord West, Minister for Security and former head of the Navy also said on Monday that there was a possibility that terrorists may use small craft to enter ports and launch an attack similar to events in Mumbai, 2008. It is feared that terrorists could transport a CBRN improvised explosive device up rivers and detonate it in the heart of some of Britain's cities. Alongside London, Bristol, Liverpool, Newcastle, Glasgow and Belfast are deemed to be vulnerable targets.

For reasons of national security, none of the reviews provide specific details of the threats that the United Kingdom currently faces. However the reports emphasise the current mechanisms in place to counter terrorist attacks. These are:

- The development of comprehensive strategies to protect sites critical to the national

infrastructure, crowded places and borders.

- The Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Strategy for Countering International Terrorism. This seeks to protect lives by preventing a CBRN attack from occurring. The strategy also seeks to minimise the risk of loss of life or injury and return to normal as quickly as possible.
- The training of thousands of emergency service personnel and key officials to deal with terrorist incidents, including those involving CBRN weapons.
- Work with explosive and chemical industries to secure materials that could be used by terrorists. This approach has been replicated through the European Union CBRN Action Plan.
- The Home Office, in conjunction with the National Counter Terrorism and Security Office, local police Counter Terrorism Security Advisors and other local partners, is developing a framework to reduce the vulnerability of crowded places in the UK.
- The CBRN Resilience Programme. This seeks to enhance the UK's ability to respond to a CBRN attack. The UK has equipped 18 sites nationwide with trained officers to make a multi-agency response to a CBRN attack. The programme is supported by the CBRN response centre. This provides a twenty-four hour operations and advice facility that in the past year has provided support to over 100 CBRN-related incidents.

These measures have now been strengthened by the launch of the National Maritime Information Centre (NMIC). Based in Northwood, Middlesex, the NMIC will utilise the full range of Government agencies to combat maritime piracy, terrorism and smuggling. The new £350,000 centre seeks to develop a 'single picture' of maritime activities by improving intelligence sharing between the police, the Royal Navy, coastguard and other government agencies. At the launch of the NMIC Lord West reiterated the possibility of a terrorist attack being launched from a speedboat. As hundreds of small boats enter the UK unchecked each year, the need for the NMIC is essential.

It would be easy to assume that the United Kingdom faces the imminent threat of a terrorist attack using CBRN weapons. Yet this cannot be confirmed due to reasons of national security. Without such confirmation the argument raised in Viewpoints that CBRN weapons do not reflect current strategic trends of terrorist organisations remains relevant. Instead the NMIC now joins other Government initiatives that seek to improve emergency preparedness for such events.