

HURRICANE KATRINA: NATURE'S "WEAPON OF MASS DISRUPTION"

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Abstract

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans was reduced to a devastated shell of its former self. In spite of significant warnings ahead of time, the city, the State of Louisiana and the Federal Government were overwhelmed by the impact of the category 4 hurricane, and thus were unable to effectively allocate resources and respond in a timely manner. For several days the city was left to manage the consequences of Hurricane Katrina alone. Can we learn some significant and valuable lessons from this event and apply them to what might be the possible aftermath if a "dirty bomb" was detonated in a city?

As you read this, you may be asking: "Why are you worried about a manmade "dirty bomb"?" Well, many individuals may not be aware of this, but a manmade "dirty bomb" scenario is actually one of the foremost concerns in terrorism activity at this time in the US.

A "dirty bomb" does not have to be manmade. Nature provides us with many potential "dirty bombs", these may come in the form of readily recognized natural disasters such as, hurricanes, tornadoes and earthquakes; or as a pandemic.

Introduction

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has been reduced to a devastated shell of its former self. Despite significant warnings, the city, the State of Louisiana and the Federal Government were overwhelmed by the impact of the category 4 hurricane.

Preparedness Responsibility

In today's fast paced environment waiting can be deadly. It was revealed that the Director of FEMA waited almost four hours before contacting Homeland Security regarding the situation in New Orleans. This "wait and see" approach was disastrous. Would a similar delay occur if a manmade "dirty bomb" were detonated in a similar sized city?

Let's analyze just a few examples from the Katrina aftermath. Without question, New Orleans, the fourth largest port in the world, is vital and strategically important and in fact is the gateway to the Mississippi River. The port ships 50% of the grain exported by the U.S. The port accounts for 25% of the coffee imported and 25% of the seafood that comes into the

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U.S. The Louisiana Offshore Oil Port (LOOP) is located near the city. The LOOP carries about 10% of the U.S.'s oil imports. The LOOP is the nation's only deepwater tanker terminal, typically receiving almost a million barrels of foreign crude oil daily. The port facility is located in 110 feet of water about 20 miles south of Grand Isle, La., an area severely hit by Hurricane Katrina.

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No Warning

Hurricane Katrina gave us plenty of warning. With a manmade “dirty bomb” there will be no warning. *Let's repeat this vital fact – with a manmade “dirty bomb” – either nuclear, chemical or biological – there will be no warning.*

In the aftermath of Katrina, chaos, confusion and blame seem to be the order of the day. *Yet, we knew it was coming.* We had ample time to do something about the event. With no warning, albeit less destructive force, what would the potential reaction to a manmade “dirty bomb” be? Are we prepared?

Observations: Hurricane Katrina Response – Are you on your own?

Reflecting on the current state of response to the hurricane and projecting forward to the possible response to a manmade “dirty bomb” what conclusions might we draw?

Hurricane Katrina devastated the infrastructure of the Gulf Coast states. Electric Power Supplies, Gas and Oil, Telecommunications, Banking and Finance, Transportation, Water Supply Systems, Emergency Services, Continuity of Government.

A dirty bomb by any other name

Business and government must increase their efforts in the area of preparedness. The threat of a “dirty bomb” being detonated is growing not lessening. Add to that the threat of an influenza pandemic that could sideline up to 40% of the workforce, shut down foreign trade, and degrade public services and you have a recipe for calamity.

Complexity – Criticality

In the recent past we have seen twenty of the world's biggest economies in some phase of recession. These economies account for 60% of the world's output. World trade growth, which held up throughout both the world recessions of the early 1980's and 1990's, fell twelve percentage points in 2001.

A “dirty bomb” detonation could easily overshadow the devastation (in human lives and impact to businesses) from the combined hurricanes of 2005, events in Iraq, the impact of oil prices, concerns about corporate governance, problems in the IT industry and current account imbalances that have led to falls in investment around the world.

Can I afford not to be Personally Prepared?

Government and business leaders have a responsibility to protect their organizations by facilitating continuity planning and preparedness efforts. Using their status as “leaders,” senior officials, senior management and board members can and must deliver the message

that survivability depends on being able to find the opportunity within the crisis. Today we cannot merely think about the plannable or plan for the unthinkable, but we must learn to think about the unplannable.

Concluding Thoughts

Should you depend on government (at any level) for your personal well being in the event of a manmade “dirty bomb” incident? The aftermath of Katrina indicates that there is much to be done regarding the ability of government to respond effectively.

Should you depend on your employer for your personal well being in the event of a manmade “dirty bomb” incident? Market research indicates that only a small portion (5%) of businesses today have a viable plan, but virtually 100% now realize they are at risk.

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