

Preparing civil defence against chemical and biological weapon attacks: The imperative role of media

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Summary

Creating a comprehensive civil defence against chemical and biological weapon attacks is one of the most significant challenges today, and media is an imperative contributor to it. Redefining the role of media in this area can add to an efficient and potential civil defence.

In the new world of advanced science and technology, the nature of terrorism has assumed its worst manifestation. The 2008 Mumbai attack proved that terrorists aim at creating havoc and panic using unconventional means. Under such circumstances, probability of chemical or biological attack against innocent civilians can not be ignored by defence planners.

It needs to be understood in this context that the usage of chemical or biological weapons in warfare is not new. However, what makes its possibly an attractive weapon of mass destruction against masses are the astounding advancements in technology that have made them more lethal, easier to produce, store and deliver than ever before. Secondly, in the world of internet, it is easy to get or exchange technical information related to chemical and biological weapons. Most of all, the shock such kind of attacks create is what the terrorist organizations probably intent to. Although it is believed generally that these weapons would not be used on ethical grounds, usage of chemical and biological weapons in recent times point towards an increasing interest of terrorist organizations using unconventional weapons against civilians.

Soon after 9/11 attacks in the United States, Anthrax laced letters were found in the mailboxes of several media offices and two US senators. Five Americans were killed and 17 were infected in the worst biological attacks in U.S. history.¹ Earlier, on 20 March 1995, members of the Aum Shinrikyo cult released Sarin, a lethal nerve agent in the Tokyo subway system. By the end of that day, 15 subway stations in the world's busiest subway system had been affected. The number of people infected in the attacks was nearly 3,800. This attack was a wake-up call

regarding the prospects of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. Chemical weapons were not, however, the only option explored by this cult group. AumShinrikyo also developed a laboratory for toxin production by 1990 and was subsequently replaced with two new laboratories, one at Kamakuiishi and the other in Tokyo. The cult experimented with different biological agents like botulin toxin, anthrax, cholera, and Q fever and also attempted several apparently unsuccessful acts of biological terrorism in Japan between 1990 and 1995.²

Recently in Syria, alleged usage of chemical agent Sarin by the Syrian government killed more than 1400 civilians including nearly 425 children. The U.S. intelligence analysts explained that the preparations continued during 18-21 August 2013, when the projectiles were loaded into rocket launchers behind the government's defensive lines. And then half-dozen densely populated neighborhoods were jolted awake by a series of explosions, followed by an oozing blanket of suffocating gas.³ Usage of chemical weapons in Syrian conflict indicates that these weapons can also be used by state or state sponsored groups.

All these incidents clearly point towards an increasing threat of use of chemical and biological weapons against innocent civilians. Hence, developing a comprehensive civil defence system against chemical and biological weapons is the need of the hour. It involves strengthening existing norms against chemical and biological weapons, usage of latest technology, enhanced immunization, efficient public and community health facilities from local to global level and most of all, creating general awareness about these weapons across common man. Media plays a critical role in connecting with people to create general awareness about the basics of such weapons.

Also, the way it responds to such attacks contributes to a holistic civil defence against usage of chemical and biological weapons.

How media can significantly impact the extent and outcome of a terrorist attack can be understood by the role Indian media played during Mumbai terror attack. On November 26 2008, the financial capital of India, Mumbai faced the most shocking terror attacks. However, the role that media played during the entire incident needs further scrutiny. Critics describe it as 'TV terror' for showing gory scenes, being too aggressive, and often reporting incorrect information as fact. "They don't need to apologize as much as they need to introspect, figure out how to operate in a time of crisis," said Dipankar Gupta, sociology professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi.⁴

While confirming the death sentence to the only captured Pakistani terrorist Ajmal Kasab, the Supreme Court pulled the media for its role and called for self regulation in covering such incidents. From the transcripts, especially those from Taj Hotel and Nariman House, it was evident that the terrorists and their collaborators across the border were watching the full show on TV. The court further went on to say that it is not possible to find out whether the security forces actually suffered any casualty or injuries on account of the way their operations were being displayed on the TV screen. However, it is beyond doubt that the way their operations were freely shown made the task of the security forces not only exceedingly difficult but also dangerous and risky.⁵ In an overexcitement to show the live coverage, various reporters from electronic media not only created a security challenge and disturbance for the security forces combating against the terrorists, but also shared the information that was used by the terrorists. Also, the news soon took over the

social media and this all created nothing but a state of panic. The way in which the terrorist attack on Mumbai was covered, the Indian TV channels did not serve any national interest or social cause. On the contrary they acted in their own commercial interests putting the national security in jeopardy.⁶

Contrary to the uncontrolled media that complicated the situation in case of Mumbai terror attack, in another terror attack at Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi on 21 September, 2013, completely controlled media complicated the situation. During the attack, except the initial stage, the media was kept out of direct visual contact of the mall. However, this was not followed up with official updates and social media played a major role in the dissemination of news originating from various government agencies, NGOs, journalists, citizens and even the terrorists, both inside and outside the mall. It created unverified information from unreliable sources which further spread through social media network. The Al-Shabaab terrorists used social media to infuse their version of the events and to enhance the shock effect by circulation of morphed photographs of the attack and the victims inside the mall. It also affected the credibility of the media.⁷

Media has a capability of evading the situation of panic by positively informing people. However in both situations, totally controlled and uncontrolled, media added to the state of fear and terror, which further complicated the situation. Although both examples are related to terrorist attacks in which no chemical and biological weapons were used, it is clear that the role of media during such incidents is crucial. It is not difficult to imagine the media response in case India was to face a chemical or biological weapon attack.

Thus, it is very important to pay attention to media's contribution in combating chemical and biological weapon use. First of all, a self regulatory in media is required as wrong or uncontrolled information can not only create a panic, it can also help the terrorists in accomplishing their goals. Second, to combat possible chemical and biological attacks, media and government have to go hand in hand. Government can take media's help in running various general awareness programmes in educating people. Creating general awareness is significant to establish a potential civil defence against chemical and biological threats. Various forms of media can be used in sharing basic knowledge about these unconventional weapons. They can also help in establishing a potential civil defence by educating people about how to identify an attack, understanding delivery models of such weapons, response mechanisms and emergency contacts in case of an attack. Media's role in creating civic awareness and education is critical to minimize loss of human life. Creating a comprehensive civil defence against chemical and biological threats is one of the most significant challenges and media can play an important role in this respect.

Endnotes:

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