

Formation of Effective Multi Agency Incident/Emergency Management Teams in a CBR context

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Abstract

Effective incident management in a high consequence but rare Chemical, Biological and Radiological (CBR) events presents many challenges for agencies, government and the community. The successful and sustainable response to such incidents requires a multi-agency approach. This paper will discuss how we prepare as a State in terms of training incident managers from very different disciplines that will allow strategic decision making early on in a CBR event.

Victoria has learnt some bitter lessons in the past in that up until the 1983 Ash Wednesday, fire agencies were acting independently in how they trained and responded to such large scale events. The last 25 years has seen a dramatic improvement in how agencies understand their roles and responsibilities, as a combined multi agency response builds far greater capacity and capability to respond to such incidents.

The increase of CBR terrorist incidents both overseas and in Australia puts demands on modern emergency services to utilise their expertise and resources in the most effective manner. Multi agency response to these attacks is by their very nature dynamic and confusing where information about the event takes time to crystallize. It is imperative for incident managers to join forces early in the event to limit the casualties and community disruption.

Multi agency CBR Incident Management training has not been available before 2005 with Victoria only developing a course in preparation for M2006. This course must further evolve that will see individual agencies elevate training of their emergency managers in this necessary competency.

Background

Victoria has for some time recognised that a multi agency approach to emergency response is the only way to build adequate capacity for high consequence events. However this was not always the case, with the Ash Wednesday Fires in 1983 providing the State Government the impetus to improve relationships amongst the various Emergency Service Organisations (ESO's) improved. DISPLAN arrangements were born out of which today's Emergency Management Arrangements have evolved and in fact are still evolving.

But what have we learnt from the past? It is fair to say that the build up in Victoria to current practices was fairly slow. Major emergencies, mainly fire, have seen fire agencies such as Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) move to a more coordinated approach to fire management in the last five years. The Alpine Fires of 2003 saw a wide ranging inquiry by the Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner (OESC), where it was recognised that joint agency Incident Management Teams enabled substantially better coordination of resources. These arrangements were further tested and enhanced by the forming of Integrated Fire Agency Coordination (IFAC) in The Great Divide Fires of 2006/07 that created a more effective utilisation trained personnel in long duration events.

But what training has Fire and other Emergency Service Organisation (ESO'S) received in engaging in this coordinated approach and how does this relate to CBR training? Very little joint agency training is undertaken at a State level for either fire or CBR. Prior to M2006 Commonwealth games, two CBR Incident Management courses were facilitated by Emergency Management Australia (EMA) and held at Mt Macedon campus. These courses were adapted from the original CBR Explosives and Incendiary courses facilitated by EMA and designed in a train the trainer format. By their very nature they provided generic CBR awareness training to cover a wide cross section of ESO's and Public Health personnel. Great for spreading the knowledge of the CBR risk but not designed to cover effective incident management training.

The State CBR Training Working Group a sub group of the State CBR Emergency Planning Committee was tasked in 2006 with continuing the multi agency incident management training and has since facilitated with the assistance of the OESC and Department of Human Services (DHS), two courses. There have been very well received from Incident Management practitioners, but the question arises, "should a working group coordinate and facilitate such important training"?

Similarly CBR exercising is intermittent where once state based exercise writing team existed that coordinated the exercise, but this has fallen away in recent years. Similarly the Emergency management training Committee auspice under the State emergency management arrangements, was tasked with implementing and emergency management training strategy for the State, but it has not met for some time and its continued existence is under review. Victoria Police and Fire agencies have run a number of smaller drill type exercises following M2006 but there has been little coordination of effort.

Lessons Learnt

In researching for this paper I have concentrated on two terrorist events that demonstrate the difference between an uncoordinated response and a coordinated response can greatly affect the outcomes.

The Sarin attack on Tokyo in 1995 resulted in 12 deaths and approx 1000 casualties and saw the hospital system in Tokyo overwhelmed by the injured and the "worried well". The Sarin was released in plastic bags by the perpetrators on five different trains at peak hour in the Tokyo Subway system. It is fair to say that the authorities were very much under prepared for this event.

Some of the major lessons were:

- The dispersal of the agent went undetected by the authorities for some time and the coordination of emergency services inconsistent and reactive to local situations. Hospitals across the city were notified by the media some 3 hours later that the substance was in fact Sarin and that casualties should be treated accordingly.
- The train system was not shut down even though the Subway Authority had knowledge of the severity of the situation. The last train affected was taken out of service one hour and forty minutes after the Sarin was released.
- Emergency service personnel and hospital staff were also casualties caused by lack of appropriate protective clothing and equipment. Decontamination of casualties did not take place resulting in hospital staff developing symptoms of Sarin poisoning.

In conclusion planning and coordination of the response to this event was found wanting. Tokyo today is now much better prepared for a terrorist attack and has learned a great deal from this experience.

More than 30 years of terrorist bombings together with the learning of September 11 has resulted in London being more resilient than many other cities around the world. The London Emergency Services Liaison Panel (LESPL) was formed after September 11 and is responsible for joint emergency response to major incidents, to ensure that all emergency services are working together. A major incident is defined as ‘any emergency that requires the implementation of special arrangements by one or more emergency services’. The LESLP major incident procedure manual sets out the protocols that all agencies work to; the protocols are kept simple and adopt an all-hazards approach.

The Command and Control protocols involve three layers:

Gold	Strategy	‘What we intend to do’
Silver	Tactics	‘How we intend to do it’
Bronze	Operations	‘Do it’

On 7 July 2005 three separate trains were bombed on the underground rail system within 50 seconds of each other and a fourth bomb was exploded on a double decked bus in Travistock Square some time later. This resulted in 52 people killed and 528 people injured of which about half were treated at the scene and half in hospital.

A well prepared and trained multi agency response swung into a coordinated approach within 30 minutes. The major outcome of this was:

- The underground closed at 9.20 am potentially limiting further opportunity for other terrorists
- Tactical command teams were set up at each site where recent exercising saw an early coordinated approach on the ground by all services. This enabled victims to be rescued as quickly and efficiently as possible.
- Scene analysis by the initial incident commanders was carried out quickly which allowed important intelligence to be brought back to the surface, positively impacting on strategic decisions being made by the Gold Coordinating Group

London saw the Gold Coordinating Group with representatives from Police, Fire, Ambulance, Health, Local Municipal Authorities, Transport (rail and bus) and key utilities (water, electricity and Telecommunications) come together and develop a simple four point strategy:

1. Work with emergency service partners to preserve life and deal with casualties
2. Take steps to preserve evidence and, where possible, arrest offenders
3. Take steps to reassure all communities and businesses of London
4. Return London to normality

The learning from Tokyo and London events is that as well as a lack of clarity for first responders as to what has happened, there will be information overload. So what does this mean? – Confusion on several levels being Government, Media, Emergency Services and the Community.

What We Know Will Happen

If a terrorist incident does take place in Australia we can be reasonably sure it will be a high profile target/s most likely capital cities. Recent terrorist attacks has seen Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) as the weapon of choice, but that does not mean that other C, B and R material cannot be used. We cannot be sure that multiple targets are selected as with the London and Madrid bombings or it may be one high impact event. What we do know is that initially there will be a significant lack of understanding as to what has occurred.

First responders are the first point of actual intelligence as to what is happening. Police, Fire and Ambulance will remain siloed for some time until a collective understanding starts to emerge. How this understanding is achieved, is by on ground commanders coming together to form a common understanding of the situation (intelligence and size up), initiate the command and control mechanism under the principles of Incident Command system (ICS) and formulate initial tactics and strategy.

In Victoria the State Emergency Response Officer (SERO) would be alerted to the situation and the State Emergency Response Coordination Centre (SERCC) would be assembled as the strategic multi agency group responsible for the coordination of the response of emergency services. The State Crisis Centre (SCC) would be activated by the State Government as the focal point for political/strategic management of the incident. I am sure similar plans and arrangements exist in other States as well so a generic approach will be discussed.

What We Would Like To See Happen

First Hour

Initial response to a CBR event will see each agencies first responders adopt their own procedures for dealing with the emergency. It will be a significant advantage for agency Commanders to be aware of the other agencies initial response procedures viz.:

- Police will cordon and contain the scene
- Fire will attempt to rescue victims and mitigate the hazard
- Ambulance will assess the danger for their people and start casualty management if safe to do so.

CBR awareness training is seen as essential for the protection of first responders

Once on scene the agency Commanders major priority after assessing their own agency operations is to seek out and form an Emergency Management Team (EMT) where some tactical decisions can be made to best mitigate the situation. The first meeting must see:

- Early agreement on who is the Incident Controller.
- Agreement on the EMT membership, where it meets and when.
- Understanding as to the effectiveness of cordon and contain measures.
- Appropriate resources used to evacuate casualties with early triage of casualties prioritised.
- Immediate analysis of the scene from agencies commanders to create a wider understanding of what the situation is – intelligence gathering
- Situation Reports by agency commanders – reach back

Given the nature of past CBR incidents and the chaos that ensues it is doubtful whether the EMT would have time to do anything else within the first hour.

Second Hour

The second hour would see a greater understanding of what has actually happened or is still occurring. A second EMT meeting should canvas the following:

- Formation of a action plan comprising simple objectives and tactics
- Agency responsibilities – whose doing what
- Safety issues such as minimum PPE for responders
- Crime scene considerations
- Logging of agreed decisions
- Simple media messages to advise the public

Multi Agency CBR Incident Management training will assist agency Commanders understand the criticality of the early formation of an EMT and the setting of a simple action plan with agreed objectives and tactics.

The second hour will see the high level strategic groups such as the SERCC or the SCC in Victoria start to interface with the emergency scene. Intelligence from the scene must be captured at this point and a simple plan created that describes the major strategies to be employed. These can be, but not limited to:

- The use of the media plans to reassure the community
- Preservation of life
- Crime scene considerations
- High level Government involvement to return the community to normal

Crucial to the successful response to a significant CBR event is the table top scenario based exercising of these strategic groups to ensure adequate preparedness.

What Training Must Be Delivered

Complacency is one of the major concerns for any jurisdiction. It is fair to say that in the lead up to Sydney Olympics and M2006 Commonwealth games gave great impetus for CBR awareness, training and exercising. However it can be argued not a lot of preparedness activity is taking place.

In Victoria CBR awareness training for first responders was rolled out in most agencies some 3-4 years ago and for many this training has not been revisited. First responders are the most vulnerable in an incident so this knowledge must remain current for the protection of our ESO workers and the communities they serve.

Mutli-Agency training of any sort is mainly provided through EMA which is a very limited resource. The Victorian course is run by the CBR Training Working Group with the help from DHS and this is neither sustainable nor desirable. The State must commit to supporting this course in a more sustainable way and it is my view that the OESC should manage same. These courses are of great benefit in providing the knowledge for command staff to encourage early coordination of resources to a high consequence mass casualty CBR incident. They also create the opportunity of forming relationships amongst agency commanders/managers that help significantly in an emergency situation.

High level exercising of strategic decision makers across agencies does not occur regularly outside the ICEMEX regime. This is a weakness in the system that can be improved upon. Multi agency table top exercising with senior commanders/managers must be a regular fixture in every states preparedness regime.

London's preparedness for a terrorist attack is seen as a good example of planning and execution from all levels of Government and ESO's alike. Victoria must commit appropriate resources to better foster a planning and training/exercising regime that is currently available. The OESC is best place to promote and coordinate this activity across all agencies and jurisdictions.

Conclusion

For many a CBR terrorist event seems an unlikely scenario, however the risk is real and with this goes the responsibility for Government and ESO's to maintain an appropriate level of preparedness. Lessons learnt from overseas CBR incidents are valuable. London has shown us that the planning, training and exercising at tactical and strategic levels have proven invaluable in its response to the bombings of 2005.

Victorian and indeed Australian jurisdictions must also commit to keeping its emergency response resources as well prepared as possible. CBR awareness training, mutli-agency incident management training and senior command level exercising will go a long way to better protecting our communities.