

A new kind of war?

Experts fear biological attack

By MELISSA BRADDOCK
THE BATTALION

A terrorist attack need not be so obvious as wrecking a jet into a skyscraper. A crop duster or a modified fire extinguisher could deliver a weapon that is invisible, hard to detect and at least as deadly as a bomb.

A small cloud of bacteria or viruses could silently and easily infect thousands before doctors even recognized the problem.

Hours after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, federal health agencies notified state health departments to "initiate heightened surveillance for any unusual disease occurrence or increased numbers of illnesses that might be associated with today's events."

This warning was passed on to doctors, labs, local health departments and 911 centers around the nation. Security was tightened at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and bioterrorism response teams were put on alert.

In New York, military surplus stores are reported to have sold out of gas masks.

All these measures were only precautionary, and there has been no evidence of a biological or chemical assault.

Now, experts are warning that there is a significant risk of

bioterrorist attack and that the United States is not prepared to deal with such an attack.

"Anything is possible when dealing with religious fanatics," said Don Jenkins, an instructor in the Texas Engineering Extension Service at A&M who teaches threat and risk assessment training courses focusing on terrorism to law enforcement and emergency personnel.

"Given that we know that Iraq has biological and chemical weapons programs and that bin Laden and his al Qaeda network have close ties with Iraq, you can draw your own conclusions. I'd say that they definitely have the means available," Jenkins said.

Military use of biological and chemical weapons is nothing new. Smallpox was used as a weapon by British forces in the French and Indian War when they gave infected blankets to hostile American Indians. Tear gas and mustard gas were used widely in WWI.

Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against both Iran and Iraqi Kurds during the 1980's, and during the Cold War, the United States and the former Soviet Union built vast germ-warfare stockpiles.

Most recently, a militant Japanese sect released sarin nerve gas on the Tokyo subway in 1995 killing 12 and injuring thousands.

In 1972, a biological weapons treaty was signed by 143 countries to outlaw the development, production, and stockpiling of biological weapons, but international treaties do little to hinder terrorists.

A state department report lists several countries suspected of developing biological weapons including Russia, Iraq, China, Syria, Iran, Egypt, Libya, Taiwan, and North Korea. It is considered likely that hidden research remains undetected elsewhere; programs are easily hidden as medical or agricultural research.

A leader of Afghanistan's Taliban told The Associated Press last year that bin Laden was training fighters in the use of chemical weapons, and the *New York Times* has reported satellite pictures of terrorist training camps in Afghanistan that show dead animals on test ranges, a scene suggesting experimentation with biological or chemical weapons.

Attorney General John Ashcroft told Congress that a suspected hijacker in the attack on the World Trade Center had shown interest in crop-dusters.

Threat of chemical attack is somewhat higher than that of a biological attack, but biological weapons pose the greatest threat because of their ability to spread quickly beyond those affected by the initial attack. Effects may not be apparent for days or

weeks, by which time the disease could have spread massively.

Although any infectious agents or toxic chemical could in theory be used as a weapon, experts have pinpointed that smallpox, anthrax, botulism and bubonic plague as the most likely threats.

The most likely bioterrorist agent is anthrax. A particle the size of a speck of dust can cause death within 2 - 3 days of the onset of difficult to diagnose flu-like symptoms.

Even more feared, although harder to obtain, is smallpox virus. Initially appearing similar to chicken pox, smallpox is lethal and spreads rampantly. The virus killed approximately 120 million people during the early 20th century before being eradicated by vaccination programs.

Today, there are only known stocks of smallpox are in two labs, one in the U.S. and one in Russia, but experts fear that other nations may have undeclared stocks.

"We all hope that smallpox is inaccessible to these guys. If it isn't, if they used it as a weapon, it would be a disaster," Jenkins said.

He added that since smallpox vaccinations were discontinued in the 1970's and only last for 10 years, no one in the U.S. would be immune.

If a large-scale biological or



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chemical attack were launched against civilians, the United States isn't really prepared to handle it, according to a report earlier this year from the CDC.

Most doctors are unfamiliar with these diseases and may fail to diagnose them, and hospitals are not prepared to deal with such massive numbers of patients. Vaccine supplies are limited.

"We don't really have an infrastructure to deal with this at all. If it happens, doctors and emergency rooms will be the front line, not police and fireman who are trained in emergency response," Jenkins said.

One reason for the lack of preparedness is that the risk of such an attack has, until recent-

ly, been considered low.

Many experts have traditionally felt that the scientific and technological difficulties involved in obtaining a substance, producing it in large quantity, and dispersing it effectively would put such weapons beyond the scope of terrorist organizations. But Jenkins and many other experts now warn otherwise.

"When people say that these weapons are too difficult for terrorists to build and use, they aren't understanding terrorists today," Jenkins said.

"These people are intelligent, well-equipped and well-connected. There is only one reason to try to get access to crop-dusters, and that's if they have something to drop."

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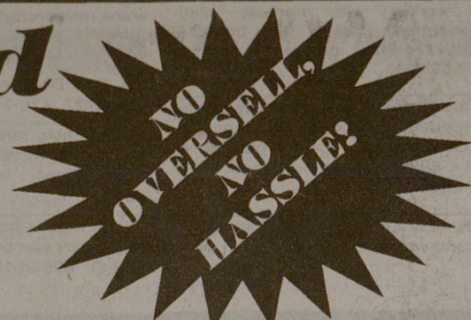
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