

# BRUSSELS BOMBING – AN ACCIDENT WAITING TO HAPPEN

In light of the suicide bombings at Brussels Airport and on the city's metro system in March, a retired Irish army general told a recent cross-border emergency management conference that the attacks on the airport, in particular, were "an accident waiting to happen", and pointed to the need for more stringent screening procedures. Report by Grace Heneghan.

On the morning of Tuesday 22 March, three co-ordinated nail bombings occurred in the Belgian capital – two at Brussels Airport in Zaventem and one at Maalbeek metro station in the city.

In these attacks, 32 victims and three suicide bombers were killed, with over 300 people seriously injured. Another bomb was found during a search of the airport. Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) claimed responsibility for the attacks. The bombings were the deadliest act of terrorism in Belgium's history, with the Belgian Government declaring three days of national mourning.

However one of the things Brussels Airport lacked was the need to screen individuals and vehicles some distance away from the main terminal building, in addition to screening the luggage outside the terminal building according to retired Brigadier General Gerald Aherne.

"The incident at Brussels Airport was magnified by the fact that two of the individuals, who were the subsequent suicide bombers, had been listed with photographs, and circulated among the Belgian police services, and indeed within Brussels, just days before hand," noted Aherne.

Addressing a recent Emergency Planning Society cross-border conference in Dundalk, on the issue of preparedness and threats – international co-ordination and information sharing, he told delegates that the situation is totally different in other parts of the world.

For example, on a business trip to Lebanon in January, he noted that the initial screening process at Beirut Airport took place two to three kilometres from the main terminal building. "Furthermore, all luggage is scanned outside the terminal building. So, these processes involve planning, identification of risk and threat, but more importantly putting in place the mitigations to ensure that the actual risk is mitigated," he stated.



"Information sharing is not the panacea of all illnesses nor is it always the best course of action," Brig. Gen. (Retd) Gerald Aherne told the cross-border emergency management conference.

## SAFE FROM TERRORISM?

He referred to recent discussions and analysis by some social and political commentators in Ireland of the challenges faced in light of recent suicide attacks.

"The two most learned observers in the Republic of Ireland, in particular, are Conor Brady, former Editor of the Irish Times, who is also one of the commissioners of the first Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission (GSOC), while the second is my colleague, retired Lieutenant Colonel Michael Murphy.

"In an article in the 'Sunday Business Post' following the attacks in Paris last November, Conor Brady wondered 'are we safe from terrorist attacks?' The truth is that nobody knows. He

outlined that Joint Oireachtas Committees addressed justice, policing and defence issues both in open and private sessions, but security and intelligence are off-limits. So, therefore, how is there any value judgements on whether the intelligence and security services in the Republic of Ireland are fit for purpose if that oversight is not there?"

Retired Brig Gen Aherne highlighted an interesting study taking place at NUI Maynooth, which is being funded by the Research Council of Ireland, and will be undertaken by Prof Mark Maguire, Head of the Anthropology at NUI Maynooth.

"He will focus on three particular incidents of great significance and great tragedy – the Andres Brevik incident in Norway (July 2011), the Bataclan shootings in Paris (November 2015) and the terrorist attack on the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi (Autumn 2013). In each case Prof Maguire will investigate how people who are caught up in these emergencies react before the emergency services arrive on the scene.

"One of the central themes of this study is what kicks into action before the arrival of the emergency services concern issues to do with your own individual and society cultures, your national title and any training you have been subjected to before you arrive in that difficult situation."

### LESSONS IDENTIFIED

In terms of uniformed and non-uniformed emergency planning, he claimed that too frequently the preparation of the plan becomes the end in itself. "Even when moving beyond the preparation and production of a plan, the old cliché of 'practice makes perfect' in actual fact does not; no lessons can be learned until lessons have been identified."

Before his retirement from the Irish Defence Forces, Gerald Aherne had spent 42 years in the Armed Forces, and cumulatively over 12 years overseas on international service duties. His early years were dominated by the challenges in the Middle East, and between 2007 and 2014 he worked with the UN in East Africa.

He was chief of operations for UN forces in Liberia and Sierra Leone, serving two years as the deputy commander of UN forces in Eastern Chad and North Eastern Central Africa Republic, followed by a 14-month period spent in Mogadishu, where he initially had to move the international force from Uganda into Mogadishu.

"Therefore, issues such as terrorist threats are well known to me, particularly during my last mission in which I commanded the EU forces in Mogadishu (known as EUTM Somalia). This involved training the new Somali Army to fight the al-Shabaab militants."

He claimed that people become paralysed when the word 'threat' is used, which he said is only to be feared if the mitigation measures are not put in place to counter actual threats.

### CO-ORDINATION NEEDED

"Information sharing is not the panacea of all illnesses nor is it always the best course of action, but rather it's very much dependent on individual personalities and the situation at hand," he noted, in reference to certain international situations during a career which spanned over four decades in the Defence Forces.

He said that during that time he was "fortunate" to have worked with the UN, the EU, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty



People run out of the Zaventem Airport in Brussels after the suicide bombing. (Photo: PTI)



Lessons can be learned from Lebanon, where the initial screening process at Beirut Airport takes place outside main terminal building.

Organisation) and the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe).

From his overseas experiences, he outlined that within the UN system there is the 'whole of mission' approach, involving the disparate parts of the mission such as political, diplomatic and the military, while the EU uses the 'comprehensive approach'.

"Both approaches are about the same thing – bringing together the different strands of funding and initiatives, e.g. political, diplomatic and humanitarian, developmental and military security.

"In order for there to be co-ordination there must be a single individual who has the rank, title, appointed name and the style of control to ensure that the disparate parts of the organisation are mandatorily co-ordinated."

In his concluding remarks, the retired army general claimed that the word 'co-ordination' is used regularly within the context of the requirement for there to be co-ordination. "However, those individuals who lead the disparate parts of the overall mission that need co-ordination have no willingness to be co-ordinated. Therein lies the problem."