AFTER MOSCOW BOMBINGS, U.S. SUBWAYS STILL VULNERABLE TO TERRORISM

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THE CENTER FOR PUBLIC INTEGRITY
03/29/2010

A sarin gas attack on Japan's subway system in 1995. A foiled subway terror plot in New York City. Attacks on underground trains in London in 2005. The twin suicide bombings in Moscow.

Terrorists have repeatedly made underground transit systems a target of their planned attacks. But the fortification of U.S. subway systems remains an open question. Despite more than $1 billion spent by Washington to protect public transit in recent years, U.S. subway systems are only now starting to address threats that have been known for years.

The [bombings early today](#) of two Moscow commuter trains, killing more than three dozen, may add urgency to a problem that security experts say has taken a back seat to airline safety.

New York City's subway system, the country's largest, remains "behind schedule and over budget" on many of its security upgrades and has run out of money to fully deploy its much ballyhooed project begun nearly five years ago to create an electronic anti-terrorism surveillance system, according to a [little-noticed audit](#) released two months ago by New York State Comptroller Thomas P. Napoli.

New York City's Metropolitan Transit Authority has not deployed the full suite of cameras and monitors in its subway tunnels from a project it began in summer 2005 even though it has already spent $461 million, well more than the original $265 million price tag, the audit found. Instead, the city has been locked up in court for nearly a year over lawsuits and counter-lawsuits involving the main contractor for the project, Lockheed Martin Corporation.

MTA "acknowledges that the remaining resources for this project are insufficient to achieve the full functionality that was contemplated under the original contractor," the comptroller's audit declared in January. "Instead, the MTA has begun pursuing a short-term goal of achieving the maximum operational capability with the remaining funds."

The electronic surveillance project fits a pattern. Overall, the New York subway system's security upgrade program remains "behind schedule" and over budget on many of its initial projects, ranging from 19 months to more than 50 months behind. And the cost for the upgrades has ballooned from $591 million to $743 million, the report said.

The lagging progress in the Big Apple is magnified by revelations last year that authorities foiled an al-Qaida inspired plot to blow up the New York subway system.

Najibullah Zazi, a former Denver airport shuttle driver, pleaded guilty last month to terrorism-related charges and admitted in court that he conspired with al-Qaida in Pakistan to blow up the New York subway system. Zazi planned to use a bomb made

from the explosive triacetone triperoxide that he concocted from the chemicals in beauty supplies.

Earlier this month, WPIX-TV in New York generated some headlines when its reporter found a police officer asleep in his security booth at the Grand Central terminal, one of the alleged targets of Zazi's plot.

Others question the progress the federal Homeland Security Department has made in fortifying subways. The agency's quadrennial security review released last month mentioned subways only once in more than 100 pages.

"Subways have become a second child to some degree to the airlines," said Scott Nelson, a former deputy assistant director of the FBI and former head of security for Warner Bros. Studios and Time Warner. Authorities rely more on police and intelligence to thwart subway attacks than technology and passenger screening, he added.

"Typically what drives improvements are problems," said Nelson, now president of the corporate security firm Security & Risk Management Group, LLC. "But I think you will see in the future improved cameras, improved patrols with dogs. I think you will even see the possibility … of other screening like at airports. But I think it is still going to take a couple of serious events to get us completely there."

Though long-held fears of a chemical and biological attack in a subway system arose in 1995 after the deadly sarin attack on the Tokyo subway, the Department of Homeland Security began staging tests to study how such deadly chemicals might flow through the system last year. Washington was the first subway system tested and Boston, the nation's oldest system, had its first tests back in December. But officials said devising long-term solutions are a long way off. Homeland officials plan to study the results of the two tests to come up with early detection system recommendations.

The progress on studying and detecting chemical attacks on subway systems has been plodding.

The U.S. Army as early as 1966 conducted a test simulating a biological attack on New York's subway system, using a benign form of the Bacillus subtilis bacteria to show that trains rushing through tunnels would carry the germ throughout the entire subway system with ease, according to the book The Cult at the End of the World by the Center's David E. Kaplan that explored the Aum Supreme Truth cult behind Tokyo's 1995 sarin attack.

The Energy Department's Pacific Northwest National Laboratory — funded by the Homeland Security Department — completed and published a study back in 2007 showing how airborne chemicals could quickly spread in New York's subway system and urged that detection and first responder plans be devised from that data.

And even in the nation's capital — long a bull's-eye of wannabe terrorists — officials are only now beginning to ramp up anti-terrorism capabilities on its Metro subway system. The city's Metro Transit Police announced in January — five years after the London subway attacks — it had formed a 20-officer anti-terrorism police team to patrol subway tunnels and stations. A Homeland Security grant made creation of the team possible.

The Government Accountability Office has repeatedly said that one problem with rail and subway security is that it is left to states and local authorities, which often have varying resources, capabilities and oversight. Some in Congress are exploring whether to empower the Federal Transit Authority (FTA) to have greater oversight of rail security.

"Officials at several state oversight agencies we spoke with stated that since FTA provided little to no funding for rail transit safety oversight functions, and because of competing priorities for limited state funds, they were limited in the number of staff they could hire and the amount of training they could provide," the GAO, the auditing arm of Congress, warned in December.

The GAO last year also urged the Department of Homeland Security and its Transportation Security Administration to do a better job in using risk analysis to identify which transit agencies should get anti-terrorism funding. Since 2006, the department has handed out more than $1 billion in grants to better protect public transit systems against terrorist attacks.

"Although TSA allocated about 90 percent of funding to the highest-risk agencies, lower-risk agency awards were based on other factors in addition to risk," the GAO warned.

That June 2009 report succinctly identified the continuing risks that subways systems and other means of mass transit face from terrorism.

"Certain characteristics of mass transit systems, such as multiple access points and limited barriers to access, make them inherently vulnerable to terrorist attack and therefore difficult to secure," the GAO reported. "High ridership, expensive infrastructure, economic importance, and location in large metropolitan areas or tourist destinations also make them attractive targets for terrorists because of the potential for mass casualties and economic damage."