

STATEMENT BY
ASSISTANT CHIEF JOSEPH W. PFEIFER
CHIEF OF COUNTERTERRORISM AND EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS
FIRE DEPARTMENT OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

BEFORE

THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY'S
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COUNTERTERRORISM AND INTELLIGENCE

ON

PROTECTING THE HOMELAND AGAINST MUMBAI-STYLE ATTACKS
AND
THE THREAT FROM LASHKAR-E-TAIBA

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INTRODUCTION

Good morning Chairman McCaul, Chairman King, Ranking Members Higgins, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee for Counterterrorism and Intelligence. My name is Joseph Pfeifer and I am the Chief of Counterterrorism for the New York City Fire Department (FDNY). Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the FDNY's concerns and initiatives related to the use of fire as a weapon by those who are determined to bring harm to the United States.

The use of fire for criminal, gang, and terrorist activities, as well as targeting first responders, is not new. Over the past four decades the FDNY has faced hundreds of intentionally set fires that would often target firefighters. However, on March 25, 1990 the unthinkable happened. An arsonist with a plastic container of gasoline spread fuel on the exit stairs of the "Happy Land Night Club" in the Bronx, intentionally killing 87 people, foreshadowing even larger events to come. The attacks of September 11, 2001 are remembered as the first to employ airplanes as weapons of mass destruction, resulting in the loss of almost 3,000 people. However, it was the resultant fires, which brought down Towers 1 and 2 of the World Trade Center in the deadliest attack on American soil. Seven years later, in what is described as a "paradigm shift," ten terrorist operatives from Lashkar-e-Taiba carried out attacks over three days in Mumbai, India in November 2008, using a mix of automatic weapons, explosives and fire.¹ Each of these attacks is remembered for something other than fire yet, in each, it was the fire that complicated rescue operations and drastically increased the lethality of the attacks.

A full understanding of fire as a weapon and implications for response are essential for homeland security, as it requires new policies and partnerships to address the emerging threat. Fire is an attractive weapon for terrorists for several reasons. Igniting a fire requires little to no training. Fire and associated smoke can penetrate defenses with alarming lethality. Fire makes tactical response more difficult. And, the images of fire increases media coverage, capturing world attention.² FDNY has been studying this terrorist trend closely and, as a result of those efforts, the Department is leading the national fire service on this issue.

Security personnel and emergency responders must rethink the way that they prepare and respond to incidents and anticipate the use of fire as a weapon, especially when combined with other attack methods. My testimony will focus on three areas: i) understanding the terrorist use of fire as a weapon; ii) the complexities of responding to multi-modality attacks involving fire; and iii) the role the FDNY can play in national homeland security efforts.

UNDERSTANDING FIRE AS A WEAPON

The devastating 2008 attacks in Mumbai, India represent a game-changer. Over three days, a city of nearly 14 million was held hostage while 200 people were murdered in multiple locations across the city, introducing a new model for terrorist attacks. The nature of the Mumbai attack confused those providing tactical response, rescue operations, fire extinguishment and mass

¹New York City Fire Department, *Counterterrorism and Risk Management Strategy*, 2011.

² The images of buildings on fire with people trapped at the windows captured the world's attention and provided a dramatic backdrop to the terrorist actions.

casualty care. The attackers employed multiple means of attack including: improvised explosive devices, targeted killings (assassination), hostage barricade, building takeover, active shooter, kidnapping and fire. Despite all of the violence, the most iconic images from that event remain the fire at Taj Mahal Hotel. The pictures of people hanging out the windows of the hotel to escape the fire are reminiscent of 9/11.

Brian Jenkins notably stated in 1974 that “Terrorist attacks are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press ... Terrorism is theater.” Directing the attack from Pakistan, the mastermind asked the terrorists, “*Are you setting the fire or not?*” He understood that the fire would capture the attention of the television cameras outside the hotel and would create an image the world would watch. In this case fire was used as a strategic weapon. Yet it also created a condition that complicated the rescue planning and challenged the first responders to deal with not only an active shooter threat inside a hostage barricade situation but also one where fire and smoke created a second layer of obstacles to the rescue force -- one for which they were not prepared.

On September 11, 2012, the first murder of an American ambassador since 1988 took place in in Benghazi, Libya. Though firearms, IEDs and military ordinance were used, it was not bullets or explosives that killed the U.S. ambassador. It was smoke from an arson fire. During that attack of the U.S. mission in Benghazi, which killed two Americans, terrorists reportedly linked to Ansar al-Sharia and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, used fuel from jerry cans to start a fire in the main villa, where Ambassador Christopher Stevens was sheltering in the designated location with two members of his diplomatic security detail. As the three men attempted to escape the untenable atmosphere, filled with choking, blinding smoke, the ambassador was separated from the one member of the detail who was able to escape through a window. Unfortunately, Ambassador Stevens and the other agent did not follow. Similar to 9/11 and Mumbai, the world was left with another image of a building ablaze during a terrorist attack. Following this incident, similar arson attacks took place days after Benghazi against the U.N. Multinational Force in the Sinai Peninsula as well as at the U.S. Embassy in Tunis, Tunisia.

While successful attacks are instructive, it is equally important to study unrealized terrorist plots that reveal a great deal about intentions, motivations, target selection and desired tactics of our adversaries.

- Arriving in the U.S. from the United Kingdom, al Qaeda operative Dhiren Barot carried out reconnaissance for terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. Part of his research focused on exploiting building vulnerabilities, including gaps in fire protection. He determined that he could cause significant damage to the Prudential Building in Newark, New Jersey and the Citi Corp Building in New York by ramming a loaded gas tanker truck into the lobby and then igniting the fuel.
- Another al Qaeda operative, Brooklyn-born Jose Padilla, determined that a “dirty bomb” attack might be too difficult to execute, so instead he planned to set wild fires, as well as ignite high-rise buildings by damaging the gas lines in apartments.
- An al Qaeda cell in the U.K. researched means to disable fire suppression systems to increase the impact of a plot that was ultimately disrupted by authorities.

These failed plots point to a strong interest in the use of fire as a weapon by al Qaeda and those it influences. In its widely disseminated English-language *Inspire* magazine, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has repeatedly urged aspiring homegrown violent extremists to carry out low-tech, high-impact attacks in the United States or other Western countries. In one issue of *Inspire*, self-radicalized readers are introduced to various methods of performing an attack, including the use of simple “ember bombs” to ignite forest fires. Equally important, the images from attacks like Mumbai serve as a model for others to follow.

What we are seeing from these events is that a group does not need a great deal of training to conduct a dramatic terrorist attack. Recently, we witnessed two men at the Boston Marathon kill three people, injure 275 others and paralyze the city. The Boston attacks serve as an important reminder that attacks need not be sophisticated to be deadly. Indeed, a survey of al Qaeda inspired attack plots in the United States over the past decade reveals a trend remarkable for the simplicity of attack plans. Fire as a weapon, by itself or along with other tactics, presents significant challenges that first responders and security forces must contend with in planning, preparation and drills.

COMPLEXITIES IN RESPONDING TO MULTI-MODALITY ATTACKS INVOLVING FIRE

FDNY research and preparedness efforts on fire as a weapon have centered on what is now known as the “Mumbai-style attack method.” In early 2009, shortly after the Mumbai attack, New York City fire and police began a tabletop exercises focused on the use of fire in terrorist attacks. The salient features of a Mumbai-style attack include: multiple attackers, targets and weapon-types (guns, explosives and fire) deployed over a prolonged operational period leveraging media attention to amplify the effects of the attack.³ These factors create unique challenges for first responders beginning with the ability to quickly and accurately gain situational awareness of the nature and extent of the attack, the need for multiple command posts to address multiple attack sites and tactics, techniques and procedures to deal with attacks deploying both fire and other attack modalities, e.g., active shooter.

Fire presents a qualitatively different type of attack when used in conjunction with other attack means. Fire, and its associated smoke, can prove disorienting to a responding force, inhibit ingress to the target, create structural dangers and potentially increase the number of casualties that the security forces will encounter while trying to resolve the situation. These factors present significant challenges to counterterrorism operations.

To address these complex challenges, the FDNY has reaffirmed its relationships with established partners like the NYPD, and forged new partnerships that add essential expertise to develop effective techniques, tactics and procedures. The results of these initiatives are jointly published intelligence bulletins, forward-looking joint exercises and information exchanges that are pushing response models forward.

Several partnerships are worthy of mention: FDNY began meetings with FBI’s New York SWAT team to explore the idea of joint tactical teams simultaneously facing armed terrorists, fire and smoke, victims and mass casualties. Discussions and tabletop exercises led to two full-

³ Fire Department in the City of New York, “Defining a Mumbai-style Attack,” *Fireguard*, April, 2011.

scale exercises that tested this concept. The insights gained from this one-year collaboration with the FBI culminated in the *Interagency Tactical Response Model* released in June 2012.

In May of last year, FDNY began collaboration with the U.S. military's Special Operations Forces that specialize in rapid solutions to current and anticipated problems on the battlefield. As with the FBI, a series of meetings, training modules and tabletop exercises led to the group's February 2013 "Red Team" paper on *Fire and Smoke as a Weapon*, envisioning a Mumbai-style attack in a hypothetical Manhattan office building in an attempt to gauge emergency responder preparedness related to this novel attack method.

After the Benghazi attacks, FDNY was leveraged to advise the Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service, specifically its high-threat response team called the Mobile Security Deployment. Diplomatic Service agents were briefed on the most critical features of fire as a weapon. Agents were then put through firefighting training at the FDNY training academy, including extrication of fortified vehicles and a walk-through exercise of a Mumbai-style scenario.

Finally, the FDNY has worked closely with the London Fire Brigade on counterterrorism measures since the 7/7 bombings in 2005. In preparation for the 2012 Olympics, FDNY discussed with the London's fire service and the Metropolitan Police Service possible response scenarios to active-shooter attacks involving fire in multiple locations.

LEADING ROLE OF FDNY IN NATIONAL HOMELAND SECURITY EFFORTS

As consumers of intelligence, and the first line of defense when terrorist attacks occur, emergency responders require the best intelligence to carry out their duties across all mission areas. The understanding of the threat environment drives training initiatives, general awareness, safety protocols, operating procedures and risk management.

However, the fire service is more than a consumer of intelligence. It is also a producer, as well as a non-traditional intelligence partner. Firefighters and emergency medical personnel offer unique perspectives to more established intelligence partners and law enforcement, adding richness and insights in the understanding of the vulnerabilities and consequences related to varying threat streams. For more than five years, FDNY has produced a weekly intelligence product called the *Watchline*, balancing a strategic focus with operational relevance to its primary readership: emergency responders. Fire service intelligence serves not only the response community but its intelligence partners with the delivery of tailored intelligence on the latest threats, trends, events and innovations that affect these groups, including the use of fire as a weapon on the world stage.

FDNY has also sent one of its officers to the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) on a one-year detail where he not only receives the latest intelligence and threat data but he also provides the intelligence community with fire service subject matter expertise on a broad range of issues related to emergency responders. NCTC has committed to provide first responders with the best threat intelligence so they can operate safely in performing their life saving mission, and recognizes the intrinsic value of this non-traditional partnership.

In addition, the FDNY collaborates with other partners throughout the intelligence community on the production of intelligence products. In May 2012, the Department of Homeland Security Office of Intelligence and Analysis released *Terrorist Interest in Using Fire as a Weapon*, written in close consultation with FDNY.⁴ Key findings centered on the advantages of using fire over other terrorist tactics, potential for mass casualties, economic damage and emergency resource depletion.

Working with the Department of Defense's Combating Terrorism Technical Support Office and New Mexico Tech's Energetic Materials Research and Testing Center, the FDNY wants to examine the vulnerability of high-rise building fire suppression systems. This interagency group hopes to construct a fire protection system and building mock-up for the purpose of testing blast effects on standpipes and sprinklers. Test results could then be used to inform first responders, Homeland Security and the State Department of the level of vulnerability of a combination attack of IEDs and fire.

CONCLUSION

This type of interagency and international collaboration by the FDNY demonstrates the importance of multi-agency solutions to these complex problems. In an era of ever constraining resources, it is critical that organizations such as the FDNY leverage their expertise to support broader audiences as we continue to face a dynamic and resilient enemy. The recognition of terrorists' interest in the use of fire as a weapon and the resulting complexities are important considerations for all first responders and security forces.

⁴ See attachment for a copy of: *Terrorist Interest in Using Fire as a Weapon*, 2012.