

OVERVIEW OF THE IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICE An Enduring Global Threat

**Colonel Daniel A. Vasenko, United States Air Force
Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization**

INTRODUCTION

The improvised explosive device (IED) is the weapon of choice for global threat networks. Criminals, international insurgent networks and terrorist organizations use energetic chemicals and other readily available materials in an improvised manner to target and destroy people, equipment and infrastructure. In addition to using compounds such as ammonium nitrate as a main charge, IED makers frequently incorporate commercial grade explosives as a mechanism for initiating the explosion.

These devices have been the greatest source of conflict-related casualties this decade. The cumulative effects of damage to infrastructure and harm to individuals, both killed and wounded, have made this weapon a significant challenge to international security. In order to respond to this threat effectively, governments and industry partners must expand security training, enhance product security measures and spread public awareness to limit threat network access to these materials.

BACKGROUND

IED components and the way threat networks employ IEDs vary greatly throughout the world. Nonetheless, common trends exist. For example, the basic composition of an IED includes explosive filler, arming switches, initiators, a power source and a container to enclose these components. In addition, individuals and groups use these devices to achieve a range of tactical, operational and strategic effects such as maiming and killing military personnel and civilians, disrupting freedom of movement, creating the perception of insecurity and influencing national will. At present, IED makers enjoy ease of access to dual-use components such as carbon rods, plastics, batteries, blasting caps, detonation cord, electronics, fertilizers and reactive materials necessary to achieve these outcomes.

Responding to this threat environment requires a multilateral approach as well as greater coordination among international partners and stakeholders. The Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization (JIEDDO) Homemade Explosives (HME) Task Force's mission is to apply this approach using a whole-of-government and whole-of-industry strategy that leverages the authorities and expertise of multiple agencies, international partners, industry associations and companies.

In support of this mission, JIEDDO leads a HME community of action that serves as a model for effective cooperation and response. Our forum relies heavily on information sharing between U.S. intelligence and interagency partners, federal law enforcement, key allied nations and forward-deployed forces. We have benefitted greatly from partnerships with private industry partners to achieve a more transparent and holistic effort to disrupt the free flow of IED precursors around the world. Together, these relationships have enabled us to successfully attack threat networks employing IEDs against military forces and the civilian population.

Our focus is to limit the use of IEDs and HME against security forces and civilian targets. To date, cooperation and coordination regarding this problem-set have led to the United Nations 1988 designations against three individuals for IED-related matters. It has also prompted the addition of more than 150 IED facilitators and associated businesses to the U.S. Department of Commerce Entities List, which has halted trade between designees and U.S. businesses. In addition, the U.S. Department of Treasury has also imposed economic sanctions on two Pakistan-based terrorists for IED-related matters and designated Taliban Senior Leader Mullah Naim Barich as a drug kingpin.

While these steps have been effective, we cannot limit the use of IEDs with government action alone. The complex nature of the global IED threat requires collaboration with, and support from, the private sector. Industry-led action has the capability to reach key populations impacted by the illicit trade in IED precursor materials—the manufacturers, distributors and end users.

For example, in 2012, the International Fertilizer Industry Association (IFA) stood up a product security task force to map out the path for enhanced product security and a public awareness campaign. In December of 2013, IFA released a formal industry awareness document that enables its members to convey a unified product security message and add measures of effectiveness to its overarching “Protect and Sustain” program. Pakistan’s largest fertilizer company, the Fatima Group, has also implemented multiple improvements to its distribution procedures as well as its packaging and tracking program to ensure its fertilizer is delivered to legitimate end users. Based on engagement with JIEDDO, they suspended sales of calcium ammonium nitrate fertilizer products in the border provinces of Baluchistan and Kyber-Pakhtunkwa in early 2013, altering dealership processes at 228 dealers in those areas.

In addition to the industry outreach efforts described above, JIEDDO’s outreach to the private sector has included efforts to shape the way they manufacture and distribute their products. These actions include, but are not limited to, modifying products to make them less detonable or more difficult to process into HME, instituting effective industry-wide product security standards, implementing safeguards regarding the production, transportation, and distribution of nitrogen fertilizers and producing a global education and awareness campaign. We are also working with the explosives industry to achieve similar goals: expanded security training, enhanced product security measures, and global education and awareness.

DISCUSSION

Throughout the world, we are seeing an increase in cooperation among the groups who use IEDs. They share funds, training, supplies and expertise about how to access precursor materials and use them to build bombs. The April 2013 bombing at the Boston Marathon highlighted this activity as the bombing suspects found the instructions for building their IED in al-Qaida’s online magazine, *Inspire*. In response to this event, Pakistani Army Chief, Ashaq Parvez Kayani explained, “The recent Boston bombing involving the use of an IED manifest[s] the international dimension of this threat and serves as a stark reminder that even the most developed nations of the world remain vulnerable to this threat.”¹ In order to mitigate the harmful effects of the transnational

¹ Asad Kharal. "Improvised Explosive Device: Terrorists' Weapon of Choice." *The Express Tribune with the International New York Times* 20 October 2013, Online

migration of proven IED techniques through word of mouth, training and various mass media outlets, governments must work with industry partners to share relevant data.

Sharing information about IEDs, and ensuring industry partners have the details they need to mitigate this threat, is an important step in reducing threat network access to IED components such as fertilizers and commercial grade explosives. Industry-to-industry and industry-to-government dialogues have the capacity to ensure suspicious activity is identified, reported and investigated before an IED event occurs. Building this mutual understanding may include product security related education and training, the sharing of best practices and the expansion of collaborative efforts and awareness campaigns. This type of teamwork and communication is one of the surest ways to reduce the ease of which terrorists, insurgents and criminals obtain and use licit products in an illicit manner.

Additionally, efforts to secure commonly used IED components, or make it easier to track these products through threat network supply chains, will make it easier to disrupt the transfer of fertilizers and commercial grade explosives from licit to illicit channels. With advances in tracking products through the supply chain, we have been able to identify and exploit critical terrorist network vulnerabilities. These tools have enabled us to identify key threat network operators, link IED events to specific participants in the illicit supply chain and address product security concerns with legitimate companies that may not be aware that their products are being used for nefarious purposes.

Our message to industry is clear—it is a matter of global security to know your customers. Educating the legitimate end users of commercial grade explosives of the potential misuse will empower manufacturers and distributors to secure these materials and notify the appropriate authorities of suspicious behavior.

Since 2012, authorities in North and South America, Europe, Africa and Asia have repeatedly seized commercial grade explosives clearly intended for use in IEDs and other illicit purposes by various criminal and insurgent groups. Throughout these regions, numerous attacks have illustrated the grave impact these groups with access to IED precursors can have on safety and security. As a result, it is imperative global stakeholders develop lasting partnerships, share information, spread public awareness and take effective action to limit the ability of threat networks to acquire and employ these materials.

CONCLUSION

Our experience from more than a decade of combat operations continues to illuminate the complexity of the IED problem. The IED threat is not just a military problem—success against a bureaucratically unencumbered enemy requires a seamless whole-of-government and whole-of-industry approach that integrates the capabilities and expertise of all partners.

IEDs, and the networks that employ these asymmetric weapons, will continue to be a fixture of criminal and terrorist activity throughout the world and a threat to our homelands for decades. We must continue to coordinate our efforts, capitalize on our individual areas of expertise and work closely with industry partners to ensure preparedness for future threat environments. There is no “silver bullet” to defeat the IED threat. However, we can ensure greater global security by coordinating our actions.

TAKE AWAY MESSAGES

Expanded Security Training:

Sharing information about IEDs, and ensuring industry partners have the details needed to mitigate this threat, is an important step in reducing threat network access to IED components such as fertilizers and commercial grade explosives.

Product Security Measures:

Producers that limit the availability of these materials, or make it easier to track products through the supply chain, will facilitate the disruption of the transfer of commercial grade explosives from licit to illicit channels.

Global Education and Awareness

Knowing your customers, and making the legitimate end users of commercial grade explosives aware of its potential misuse, will empower them to secure these materials more effectively and notify the appropriate authorities of suspicious behavior.