

N 2 Bruté?

Gwyn Winfield contributes to the future of CBRN and whether the N for narcotics will soon be added

Panama City, in Florida, was the setting for the second (or third, depending on how you count it) CBRN Commanders and Commandants Conference. What set this event apart from the many other CBRN conferences on the circuit is that its audience is strictly controlled and open only to CBRN company commanders and commandants of CBRN/NBC Schools (and the occasional editor). The conference is where trends are set, ideas exchanged and the senior officers are able to take sounding of whether their national movement is in line with nations' at a similar degree of maturity.

The conference itself was an interesting mix of the familiar – 20th Support Command, Joint CBRN Regiment, etc – and the unusual – Latvia, the Joint Incident Response Unit – and as such provided a varied spectrum of understanding and development. Perhaps one of the most interesting movements which emerged was the gradual placement of narcotics into the "golf bag" of the CBRN officer. This has been considered before; the UK's Joint CBRN Regiment looked into it for Afghanistan, for example, since many of the processes needed to detect the chemicals involved in the production of drugs are identical to those for TICs. The UK decided not to use the Regiment for that eventually, but the idea has clearly been retained. It resurfaced in the keynote speech from Richard Douglas, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Defence for Counter Narcotics, Counter Proliferation and Global Threats. He saw the links between counter proliferation and counter narcotics as being marked; that both of them are dispersed via smuggling and can be interdicted by

better border control. He admitted this was a new experiment for the DoD, but they felt there might be a beneficial "ripple effect" from linking the two together. Much like the CBRN Officers' impact on EOD, this is not a replacement for law enforcement/counter narcotics; instead they would be assets that would be drawn upon when the need arose.

The potential counter narcotics mission was one that the UK Joint CBRN Regiment has returned to, admitted Major Miller, OC D Squadron, but nothing has been finalised yet. While other CBRN trend setters, such as the Germans and Czech Republic, have not embraced this drift, it is a significant one. There seems to be a desire to ensure CBRN officers are continually gainfully employed while in the theatre and, rather than beating the cap badge drum, the counter narcotics mission might be one way of doing it. While technically straightforward, there is the real concern that another role might well be the straw that broke the 'training' camel's back.

Czech for drugs

Certainly the Czech Republic has raised the training bar; Colonel Gajdos, the Head of CBRN Defence for the Czech armed forces, commented that the Czech plan was for Company Commanders to have a BSc, the Corp Commander to have an MSc and the head of the mobile labs to have a PhD. Admittedly, the latter is not that much of a surprise, but for commanders to be so equipped would seem a drift towards the 'soldier/scientist' concept that the US appears to be moving away from. It will come as no surprise that the main movement within the nations is towards

bio detection. While some nations, such as the Bulgarians, are bringing their whole CBRN defence capability up to a higher level, others, such as the Belgians, are looking at lifting their bio detection to the standard of their chem and rad. The Belgians would seem to be looking to join the US, UK and Canadians with a networked bio detection capability – their Portable Bio Alarm. While the procurement spending



Could narcotics detection become part of the CBRN officer's job? ©CBRN World



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taps get turned on in Bulgaria next year, one of their priorities is the bio recce capability they are looking to get into service by 2012. Predating this will be the new German Bio-recce vehicle that will have its first demonstrator released next year with 24 of the final systems to start rolling through the IOC of 2011. One of the other trends that was marked was the move towards lighter, faster, more capable teams. There isn't a universal phrase for these – though 'Light Role Team' does seem to be getting the most currency – but the concept is being embraced in the UK, Germany, Poland, Latvia and the Czech Republic. There was also an acknowledgement of the marriage of EOD and CBRN with most of the nations admitting that this was a capability gap that they were going to fill.

For an annual event the conference is pretty special, since there were no industry papers and no scientific treatise; it was a meeting of equals and everyone was able to donate something – even if it was a negative. The Norwegians, for example, raised the worrying spectre of funding; that as CBRN gets more complicated and the training and equipment burden surges then nations will have to make a decision about what they are going to concentrate on and what they will drop. This will necessitate a move towards more collective defence, as countries rely on neighbours or partners for such things as decontamination while they focus on something else. Colonel Ohrstrand, of the Norwegian CBRN School, offered the example of Colpro, indicating there would have to be an

acceptance of risk, or if that risk cannot be accepted then the troops don't deploy. He went on to suggest that for some smaller nations there might have to be an understanding that their assets would have to be procured with both homeland and foreign operations in mind – meaning that equipment couldn't be deployed during a high risk period. This was a cold wind blowing through the room; as is the case with many panels of experts, there is a tendency to focus on the glass being half full – the worry that it might be half empty (and soon to be emptier) is not frequently considered.

Noted success

Brigadier General Thomas Spoehr felt the conference had been a success. "This has been so much more than just sharing the information; you could do that by reading their website or brochures," he said at the end. "I have taken seven pages of notes on what other countries are doing that we could do better. The US is one of the least agile countries of all the countries in that room to react to change and thrash out new training and ideas, as we have a huge defence Corp – 22,000 of us – much larger than Singapore, for example, a small country that can spin on a dime."

General Spoehr sketched out the rationale behind the conference. "What we were hoping to do is get together the commandants and commanders of the CBRN defence forces to exchange ideas and promote co-operation," he said. "A lot of times you go to conferences and trade shows and there are a lot of different people there and to try and

pick through them and find the real folks who are in charge of the schools or their forces; is very difficult. This time they were all there. While we didn't have every country in the world, we had all the commandants or those that controlled their forces and to hear their challenges and the way they deal with their forces was very important – not that we don't love our industrial partners, but to get down to this level of discussion is hugely valuable."

While this wasn't a land forces or Nato conference, the preponderance of individuals were army and were all from Nato nations. This had not been the plan, however, as BG Spoehr explained. "It just worked out that way," he said. "The follow on to this is we want to get some of the Pacific Rim countries – Korea, Japan, Singapore, Australia, etc – that have a lot of CBRN capability. I am not sure how it was that Nato, or PFP, folks came out here; it just happened. Next time we will get everybody. I don't know about it being all land forces; we had a few air force and a couple of navy people. I don't want to keep it to the land forces; we didn't really get many representatives from the other US services, but it must remain senior military officers that deal with CBRN as a commander or commandant of the forces. It has to remain a special gathering to exchange ideas."

The next event is going to be organised by the Centre of Excellence in the Czech Republic, and held at Liberec (as opposed to Vyskov) on the 14th to 16th October 2008. Applicable delegates may get more information from assisant.jcbrncoe@army.cz

Panama City in Florida hosted the Joint CBRN Commanders and Commandants Conference ©CBRN World



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