

Leader

Busy, busy, busy...

Sometimes writing a leader for a magazine can be a difficult task, even on a quarterly. You need something new, something interesting or even inspiring, or, alternatively, something that has been getting under your skin – on occasion you are short of ideas. Not so this quarter: Contest II in the UK, the challenge thrown down by Mirzayanov (see p26), the fiasco that is NRF13, swine flu – where do you start?

Swine flu is probably the easiest to deal with; it is hard to see this as anything other than a dry run for avian flu, or something more deadly. It is an interesting example of what happens with a covert release; no one seems quite sure how long this disease might have been incubating in Mexico, where it came from or how it began. Instead, it appeared on a rising tide – admittedly not a storm tide – of morbidity; it was suddenly diagnosed and the World Health Organisation (WHO) and CDC swung into (over re-?)action. The first obvious conclusion was the pointlessness of closing borders; by the time of confirmatory diagnosis it was already out of national borders and on its way to a city near you. What the map currently shows is that those cities with borders (the US), or established travel links (Spain and the UK), to Mexico have suffered the worst.

While there is a certain amount of trepidation about its seasonal return, it does seem that current measures have been an overmatch for it. Yet even that has not been enough to halt its human-to-human spread. Anti-virals, such as Tamiflu, have been spurned by some individuals told to take them because of the reported side effects of the drug. Equally concerning are the (hopefully apocryphal) reported stories “pork parties” (no sniggering at the back Johnson) where healthy individuals are getting together with flu sufferers in the hope of catching the flu in order to gain immunity if it comes back in a second season. If we park the rather thorny issue of whether this will have any positive effect and just look at the practical aspects, this has an extremely damaging impact on the health system, depriving resources from properly sick people. In terms of examples of state attempts to deal with pandemics, and people’s idiocy, it is a very interesting case. There is also a seeming predilection in the virus for middle aged Males – something that is a cause for concern in terms of the viability of creating targeted bio agents.

Contest II is the latest policy paper for the UK’s counter-terrorism strategy, which focuses a great deal on CBRN and was delivered to very little fanfare – copies can be found here <http://security.homeoffice.gov.uk/counter-terrorism-strategy>. The lack of media interest is a sign of the

economic times, but there were some interesting bits in there. As well as the usual suggestions that terrorists are looking to acquire CBRNE weapons and that there needs to be a multi-agency approach to dealing with this, the most interesting is the decision to label CBRNE as a horizontal, rather than vertical, strand. Contest was first launched in 2003, and has been the blueprint for blue light counter-terrorist doctrine for the past six years. Now updated, it puts CBRN at the heart of all the sections – pursue, prevent, protect and prepare. One claim, which we will endeavour to explore in a future issue, was their assertion that they have provided (effectively) agent fate data – the “guidance on residual levels of contamination for the purpose of public health advice” (12.24) which, considering the amount of work Nato and the US are putting into this, is a very interesting assertion. Also of interest is a suggestion that the armed forces, specifically CBRN-trained armed forces (or even more specifically CBRN-trained Special Forces), will have a role to play in a civil emergency: “The Government... plans to use the armed forces to augment [their] response. Niche capabilities include scientific expertise and analysis and the *ability to operate in high threat and hazardous environments*” [14.39, italics mine]. I don’t have a problem with that, but it will be interesting to see whether that policy decision ever gets down to actually training the military and civil units that will go in.

Then there is the challenge inherent in Dr Vil Mirzayanov’s book, *State Secrets* (for a review see p101). This has got the intelligence community hopping, and a number of research labs quietly busy. What is the likely outcome? Personally I think there will be a major effort to keep this as quiet as possible; “we” all “know” what the CWAs are – VX, Sarin, etc – and I will be very surprised whether we are *allowed* to consider Substance 232 or 262 a threat. Mirzayanov has tried to part the veils of secrecy (for the second time!), and while he might not be hauled off to Guantanamo (or wherever our version of Lefortovo Prison is this week) there can be no doubt he has been scratched off many Christmas card lists. If there is a security “carpet” there is no doubt Mirzayanov and *State Secrets* are being brushed underneath it. [Postscript – Mirzayanov has complained that his book has been taken off Amazon and that reviews are being deleted, this is not apparent on the UK version of the site, however]

Sadly, and for some no doubt thankfully, we have run out of space to talk about NRF13 and the joy that portends. More anon!