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Autumn 2007

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BISA begin again

AROUND the time that the Summer edition of *CBRNe World* went to print, the UK Ministry of Defence announced – somewhat quietly – that it was cancelling their NBC Battlefield Information System Application (BISA) forthwith. The BISA was the UK's version of JWARN, an 'improvement' on the capability provided by NBC Analysis, or BRACIS as it is known in the UK, and a priority program as a key enabler of the UK's NEC (Network enhanced capability). A MoD spokesman announced that "This has been cancelled by mutual agreement due to technical difficulties in pre-existing software. These would have introduced risks into the software which would have resulted in irreconcilable problems. The cancellation of this project is not to be seen as having any adverse effect on EDS, which is a key partner of the MoD. There is still a requirement for a capability enhancement."

This is an announcement that leaves no-one looking good. The MoD cannot confirm how much of the £18million contract value was wasted – presumably much of it since the problem is likely to be in the software. Fujitsu (who EDS replaced in) seem to have lost their grip and started the rot. The fact that the MoD will not confirm whose software was at fault means that blame must also go to Scisys who did the coding and also DSTL who had input on this 'pre-existing software'. DSTL is likely to be exonerated as time evolves in terms of blame for software, but may be guilty of being involved to such a degree in the software that the program was dependent on them – which begs the question 'why did industry need them so badly and why could they not stitch their bits together'? EDS, as the current incumbent, do least badly, having been provided with an escape 'chute by MoD.

BISA, for anyone who has read any of my previous articles on it, has always been a 'troubled' programme. The scuttlebutt was that the BISA was initially seen to be an integration project with a little bit of coding. Post-win the full scale of the problem became known and the realisation dawned that it was an NBC software contract with a modicum of integration. So it has proved. The ability to pass data through the system has never been the issue; instead it has been the warning and reporting and modelling side of the contract that has consistently failed to perform.

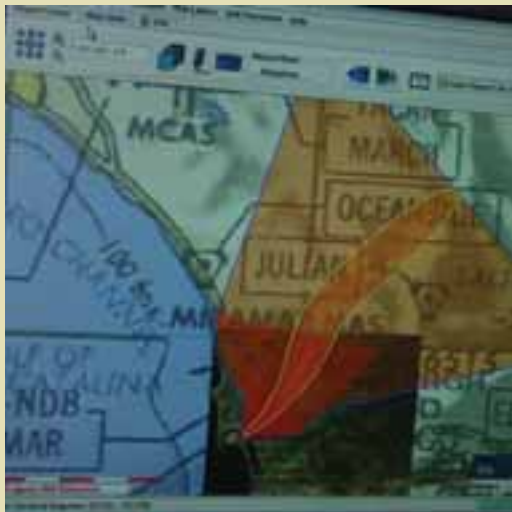
In terms of carrying the can, that hospital pass seems to fall into Scisys' hands, who were the engineers for the modelling and warning and reporting and not covered by the protective coverall handed to EDS by the MoD – guilt by omission. To be fair to Scisys, though, they seem to have been badly handled by the MoD who set them harsh time targets because the software was linked to the roll-out of the Bowman system: the carrier system for the BISA. As Bowman slipped it's targets so did the BISA, this outside influence left Scisys

playing catch-up or slow down as appropriate.

The scale of the problem became apparent with EDS taking strategic competitor Fujitsu out of the BISA, a rare occurrence that suggested EDS might be able to fix the problems Fujitsu had clearly found themselves bemired in. Approximately 18 months later it became apparent that EDS could not fix the problems and offered MoD the choice of trying to fix the problems (with all the budget and time issues involved with that) or to throw in the towel. NBC BISA was K'Oed. So what happens next for British warning and reporting?

This is where the bad news continues. According to the MoD spokesman, the existing service will be continued, based on the obsolete ATP45(B); there is currently no time frame for a new system and there will be a future competition. He added that the appraisal process was underway, with no idea of how long it would take and that until that was complete they didn't know whether they would upgrade the existing software as an interim solution or wait for a completely new system.

To a certain extent what's new? Government IT programmes always come to a sticky end don't they? Perhaps, but the killer question for NBC BISA is why these irreconcilable problems took so long to be discovered, why was it not discovered earlier? The lack of



Hazard Prediction – NBC BISA's demise has been long anticipated

rigorous testing on behalf of industry and the inability of MoD to program manager this aspect can be the only reason. NBC BISA was hidden under other high priority programmes in CSIS IPT and didn't receive the eyeballing it required. Industry are at fault because they were too dependent on DSTL, and other experts, and did not test it to fail – *so fail it did*. Software only does what it is told to, and MoD should have seen this sooner, NBC BISA was (and presumably is) a high priority programme and this should have had increased CBRN-aware effort expended on it a lot sooner.

The most likely temporary alternative is an upgrade of the BRACIS programme, a sticking plaster to keep the wound shut until something 'better'

comes along. Currently there are two bids that the editor knows of: Bruhn Newtech has offered its NBC Analysis Version 9M and Optimetrics has offered its NBC Warn software. The failure of BISA has caused a certain amount of soul searching within the Defence Procurement Agency, and it will be interesting to see how many other BISAs also stumble because lack of robust testing. That said, there will be no shortage of industry chasing after the contract for the future full version.

NBC BISA has had trouble written all over it for years, but this ending makes no-one happy – an interminable appraisal process, followed by an even longer procurement programme. Meanwhile the NBC Officer will now take longer to provide decisions to the commander and will require a greater amount of human skill. NBC BISA needs to remain a high priority programme, it needs to be solved soon.