

Brian O'Shea reviews the work at Belcoast and wonders why CBRN was left out in the breeze

October is not usually the month to visit Northern Belgium. Keats only got it half right; usually it is "Season of mists..." and torrential rain but armed with the thought "If it's not raining, it's not training" we arrived in Koksijde near the border with France. Yet if the sun did not shine down on the righteous, neither did it pour, and both the CBRN experts' day and the industry day were dry – a new record for Belgium! Belcoast 09 Technology Demonstration is, to all intents and purposes, FPED ([www.fped7.org](http://www.fped7.org)) Europe. Large (free) exhibition? Check. Blasts down-range? Check. Bleak airbase in the middle of nowhere? Check. While FPED is an off-shoot of the US government, Belcoast is a creature of Nato – specifically the Conference of Armament Directors (CNAD) and its Defence Against Terrorism (DAT) programme of work. As you might guess, the event is aimed at improving Nato's capability to deal with the terrorist threat, and specifically improving its critical infrastructure protection (CIP).

Belcoast is the technology demonstrator for the DAT, and specifically for CIP, but it was decided that CBRN could be shoehorned in. This is where the problems begin, but more on that later. The event was split into a range of subject matter experts' days, a VIP day and an industry/visitors day, but running on through the first week was a range of exercises to provide realistic tests of the equipment. The vast majority of the equipment there was not CBRN; mainly cameras, acoustic sensors and the C4i networks needed to stitch them all together. The exercises/demos of the first week were then worked into a video that was shown on the VIP day. The exercises themselves were largely run by industry, and while we can't comment on the other non-CBRN demos, the ones we saw were very well done. Behind all this were three large marquees; one that had some of the Nato centres/groups – C3 Agency, Terrorism COE, EOD COE etc – and the others had a wide variety of industry, some of which were involved in the demo and some which weren't.

All so far so good, and entirely reminiscent of FPED. FPED had 574

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exhibitors and, most importantly, 10,000 delegates. Belcoast had approximately 100 exhibitors and... 500 delegates. The major problem with Belcoast was that there was no one there to see it. The space between the marquees was a 300 metre walk of empty space – oh, how the Editor moaned – and no one was populating it. The team visited on both the experts' and the industry day; on the experts' day, until the Nato Warning and Reporting Panel turned up, there were two French, one Belgian, one German and one EDA delegate. Granted, more CBRN people turned up on the VIP day – got to let the brass see us there – but the one day they could have got some value from was grossly under-visited. Part of the blame has to lie with the CBRN responders – both military and civil – who decided they didn't want to attend, but it equally has to lie with the organisers of the CBRN part of Belcoast – the French and Belgian MoD. Hundreds of hours of work went into this event, but it was let down by poor marketing; they should have been representing the event at any number of CBRN conferences and exercises for the past 18 months, ensuring it was seen as an essential part of the Nato response to CBRN and force protection.

This was part of the problem – CBRN had not been planned in as an essential part of force protection and was very much an adjunct on the side. While all the other parts of the exercise were knitted together through the C4i, CBRN had its own network and played on its own – and it showed. While everything worked wonderfully well it was an advert for NBC being No-Body Cares, and the ultimate irony was that even the CBRN people didn't care enough to turn up! Vendors were left talking to themselves

and pouncing on the occasional delegate and trying to persuade them that CBRN was important.

EnviroNics, MMIC, Northrop Grumman, Paul Boye, Optimetrics, Proengin, Bertin, Bruker, Smiths, Mirion, Canberra and NBC Sys all took part, largely successfully, in the exercise. Yet, because it was not live-agent test (though small radiac sources were used for the Mirion, Canberra and EnviroNics demo) it was a case of an individual walking up to a detector with a vial of stimulant and... lo and behold... it went off! Hardly an awe-inspiring test of their capability. What was interesting was a real example of what happens with unattended sensors. Some of the acoustic/movement sensors were being "spoofed" by rabbits which provided so much "noise" that it whited out the signal from the infiltrating "terrorists". Equally, fluffy microphone sensors were taken apart with great expertise by the gangs of ferai cats that the farmer of the surrounding fields kept to keep the rodent population down. It is an important lesson for anyone in love with the concept of unattended sensors in the field that even in a benign military environment there are natural hazards that will pose challenges.

This Belcoast followed from a table-top exercise held in Brussels in 2007, and whatever shape future iterations of DAT CIP/Belcoast take it is unlikely to be run in this way and place. This is a pity, because the event showed great promise. The problems associated with it will no doubt be identified in the lessons learned and be improved on next time, but because the event will change these will either be lost, misinterpreted or ignored, and a brand new invention of "the wheel" will take place.

Belcoast might have successfully brought CBRN and EOD together in an exercise but it did not bring enough people ©CBRN World