CISA
CYBER+INFRASTRUCTURE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Complex Coordinated Attacks
Security Awareness for Soft Targets and Crowded Places

A Complex Coordinated Attack (CCA), also known as a Complex Coordinated Terrorist Attack, is a violent assault or series of assaults by one or more individuals or groups using one or more type of weapons with the intent to inflict harm on large numbers of people. While these type of attacks often result from various motives including terrorist ideology, the continued proliferation of CCAs overseas and domestically demonstrates that CCAs remain a concern for the conceivable future.

Potential Indicators

Complex coordinated attacks are an evolving and dynamic threat, shifting from symbolic, well-planned attacks on high-visibility targets to attacks that are more dispersed and difficult to detect. Like other attack vectors, specific behaviors or circumstances may be observed in perpetrators before a CCA occurs. These potential indicators may include, but are not limited to:

- Attempting to elicit information regarding a facility or building's purpose, operations, security procedures that is beyond mere curiosity and potentially suspicious.

- Unattended or unauthorized vehicles in unusual or restricted areas.

- Overt testing of security measures or emergency response.

- Procurement or purchase of unusual quantities of possible improvised explosive device (IED) materials, such as cellphones, pagers, or timers, and/or explosive precursors, such as fertilizers, fuels, or acids.

- Unauthorized personnel attempting to enter or actually entering a restricted area or protected site through impersonation of authorized personnel (e.g., police/security, janitor).

- Seeking additional access to or encountered within restricted or controlled areas.

- Misrepresent one's affiliation to cover possible illicit activity by presenting false documentation, identification, or insignia.

- Taking photos or videos of facilities, buildings, or infrastructure's seldomly used access points; personnel performing security functions (patrols, badge/vehicle checking); or security-related equipment (perimeter fencing, security cameras).

FACTS & EVENTS

The occurrence of CCAs have increased in recent years around the world, including several notable incidents:

- In April 2019, three churches, three luxury hotels, a housing complex, and a guest house in and around Colombo, Sri Lanka were targeted in a coordinated suicide bombing attack. These attacks killed 259 people and at least 500 were wounded.

- In August 2017, attackers in Barcelona, Spain drove vehicles into pedestrians and stabbed bystanders while attempting to escape, killing 16 people and injuring more than 130 others.

- In March 2016, suicide bombers detonated three devices in Brussels, Belgium, two at Zaventem International Airport and one at the Maelbeek Metro Station. The blasts killed 32 people and injured more than 330.

- On April 15, 2013, two brothers perpetrated an attack on people in the crowds during the annual Boston Marathon using a couple of homemade pressure cooker bombs detonated 12 seconds and 210 yards apart, near the finish line of the race. The attack, with retribution for US military action in Afghanistan and Iraq as motive, killed three people and injured several hundred patrons.

- On July 20, 2012, a mass shooting occurred inside a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, during a midnight screening of a film. The perpetrator set off tear gas grenades and shot into the audience with multiple firearms. The attack killed 12 and wounded 70 patrons. The day following the attack, police, bomb squads and federal agents found a large number of explosive devices and trip wires at the perpetrators apartment.

Adversarial Tactics and Techniques

Attackers may employ the following tactics, which differentiate a CCA from other types of incidents:

- Use of well-armed, well-trained individuals in small teams employing military or law enforcement style tactics;

- Strike multiple targets simultaneously or in close succession;

- Strike quickly and move to another location before law enforcement can interdict and disrupt;

- Delay or deny entry and exit to victims and first responders by blocking exits and/or chaining/rigging doors with explosives, using tear gas, and/or using fire/smoke to delay law enforcement response efforts and potentially prolong the incident;

- Deploy diversions to slow public safety response, consume responder resources, or draw responders toward or away from specific locations;

- Coordinate timing and methods (e.g., firearms, improvised explosive devices, hazardous materials) with other attackers and accomplices providing assistance to the attackers; and

- Conduct secondary attacks on first responders, evacuation routes, and/or additional sites, such as medical facilities, that are part of the response.

Mitigation Strategies and Protective Measures

Implementing comprehensive planning and preparedness considerations into an organization's security practices are key to saving lives while defending against a potential CCA. The majority of the below protective actions are options for consideration when developing emergency action plans and equipping personnel to execute those plans.

Prevention/Planning

- Apply layered security concepts (physical, procedural, intelligence) to recognize and manage threats early.
- Expect a potentially significant delay in help arriving as first responders will be overwhelmed during a CCA.
- Review existing plans to see if current actions may put people at increased risk for secondary attacks.
- Address how to implement support plans for survivors and families of the deceased.
- Ensure plans Include how to provide mental health assistance and support in recovery support efforts.

Training/Equipping

- Ensure that personnel are comfortable with emergency procedures to ensure proper implementation.
- Train personnel to recognize and report suspicious behavior.
- Train personnel for self and buddy-care to mitigate delayed first response.
- Equip shelter and safe-haven areas with medical supplies, food, and water for an extended period of time.

Additional Resources for Owners and Operators

For direct regional support, visit www.dhs.gov/hometown-security.

For additional resources, products, and information regarding the security of soft targets and crowded places, visit www.dhs.gov/securing-soft-targets-and-crowded-places.

For additional resources, products, and information regarding active shooter preparedness, visit www.dhs.gov/active-shooter-preparedness.

For additional Complex Coordinated Terrorist Attack resources, training, and FEMA grant information, visit www.fema.gov.

For life saving response training, visit www.dhs.gov/stopthebleed.