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Mineta Transportation Institute's Counter-Terrorism Expert Asks if a Moscow-type Transit Attack Could Happen in the U.S.

Public transit's "open system" leaves it vulnerable, even though many planned attacks have been prevented, says Brian Michael Jenkins

San Jose, Calif., March 29, 2010 – Officials at the [Mineta Transportation Institute](http://www.mti.sjsu.edu) (MTI) say that the deadly subway attacks in Moscow today underscore the inherent vulnerability of public surface transportation. MTI says that, while the U.S. understandably devotes most of its security resources to protecting commercial airliners, Americans must understand that terrorists do the bulk of their killing on trains and buses. The organization's database currently documents more than 2,000 separate attacks on surface transportation – 1,223 involving bombs and incendiaries – since 1970. These attacks caused 6,190 deaths and approximately 19,000 injuries.

“In 2004, two female suicide bombers brought down two airliners in Russia, killing 88 people,” said Brian Michael Jenkins, a counter-terrorism expert who directs MTI's National Transportation Security Center of Excellence (NTSCOE). “But since 9/11, terrorist bombers in Russia carried out 65 attacks on trains and buses, killing 273 people and injuring 649.”

Mr. Jenkins says that global statistics are even more dramatic. Available data indicates 125 deaths from eight attacks on airliners and commercial airports outside of war zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan since 9/11. However, during this same time there have been nearly 700 attacks on surface transportation, causing 2,500 deaths and nearly 10,000 injuries. These figures derive from a new database that MTI's NTSCOE is developing.

Could it happen here?

In 1997, New York City police interrupted a terrorist plot to carry out a suicide bombing on the city's subway system. In 2003, authorities discovered a terrorist cell in Bahrain planning a chemical attack on that same subway system. Law enforcement also prevented attacks planned in 2004 to bomb the Herald Square Station in mid-town Manhattan, in 2006 for subway tunnels under the Hudson River, in 2008 for the Long Island Railroad, and just this year on the New York subway system.

“Easy access, confined environments, and large concentrations of people enhance the effectiveness of explosives and unconventional weapons,” Mr. Jenkins says. “That and the terror created by attacking city lifelines make public surface transportation an attractive target for terrorists who are determined to kill in quantity and without discrimination. These are not symbolic attacks meant as protests. They are lethal assaults meant to kill.”

He pointed out similar attacks on Madrid's commuter trains, on London's

subways and a bus, and seven bombs on Mumbai's commuter trains. In total, 452 people were killed and 3,000 were injured.

Mr. Jenkins says that public surface transportation is difficult to protect because it is an open system. Large volumes of passengers, the need to avoid long delays, and limited resources rule out imposing an aviation security model. In addition, surface transportation commands only a small fraction of what the federal government spends on aviation security. Cities, too, are strapped for cash.

Unlike aviation security, which is regulated and run by the federal government, Mr. Jenkins says, surface transportation security is a local matter. System operators have increased closed-circuit television surveillance, deployed more security personnel, and taken other steps in accord with local perceptions of threat.

“While 100 percent passenger screening is unrealistic, some systems have implemented selective passenger screening, where some randomly selected passengers voluntarily submit their bags and backpacks for brief inspection,” says Mr. Jenkins. “In a diverse society extremely sensitive to profiling and privacy protection, selective screening must be carefully planned and closely managed to maintain public acceptance. However, it remains a useful option where, as in the wake of the Moscow attacks, subway and train systems are taking security up a notch to discourage copycats and malicious pranksters and to reassure passengers.”

Mr. Jenkins says that passengers themselves can play an important role in protecting themselves on transit. First, they should not over-react. Public surface transportation remains safer than the most risky thing they are likely to do – drive an automobile. Passengers also have a right to expect security and a responsibility to respect security measures. Regular riders also recognize routine activities on their routes, and they know what doesn't fit. They should promptly report packages, bags, and other objects left behind, as well as any suspicious activity. And they should be prepared to give an accurate description of suspects and events. Cell phone cameras can be especially useful.

How selective screening works is the subject of three recent MTI reports, [Selective Screening of Rail Passengers](#); [Rail Passenger Selective Screening Summit](#); and [Supplement to MTI Study on Selective Passenger Screening in the Mass Transit Rail Environment](#). Each of these may be downloaded at no cost from the active links, or go to www.mti.sjsu.edu, click on “Research” and “Publications,” then scroll down for the reports.

ABOUT BRIAN MICHAEL JENKINS

Mr. Jenkins is an international authority on terrorism and sophisticated crime. He directs MTI's research on protecting surface transportation against terrorist attacks. He is also a senior advisor to the president of RAND. From 1989-98, Mr. Jenkins was deputy chairman of Kroll Associates, an international investigative and consulting firm. Before that, he was chairman of RAND's Political Science Department, where he also directed research on political violence.

He has a BA in fine arts and a Masters Degree in history, both from UCLA. He studied in Mexico and Guatemala, where he was a Fulbright Fellow and received a fellowship from the Organization of American States. Mr. Jenkins was a paratrooper and a captain in the Green Berets, serving in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic. He returned to Vietnam as a member of the Long Range Planning Task Group, receiving the Department of the Army's highest award for his service. He authored several articles, reports and books, including *International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict* and *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?*

ABOUT THE MINETA TRANSPORTATION INSTITUTE:

The [Mineta Transportation Institute](#) (MTI) was established by Congress in 1991 as part of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) and was reauthorized under TEA-21 and

again under SAFETEA-LU. The institute is funded by Congress through the US DOT's Research and Innovative Technology Administration, by the California Legislature through the Department of Transportation (Caltrans), and by other public and private grants and donations, including the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The US DOT selected MTI as a national "Center of Excellence" following a 2002 competition.

The Institute has a Board of Trustees whose internationally-respected members represent all major surface transportation modes. MTI's focus on policy and management resulted from a board assessment of the industry's unmet needs and led directly to choosing the San José State University College of Business as the Institute's home. MTI conducts research, education, and information and technology transfer focusing on multi-modal surface transportation policy and management issues. Visit www.transweb.sjsu.edu