The Terrorist Attack in Kunming, China:
Does It Indicate a Growing Threat Worldwide?

by Brian Michael Jenkins, Director, MTI's National Transportation Safety and Security Center, and Bruce R. Butterworth, MTI Research Associate

At 9:00 pm on March 1, 2014, six men and two women, dressed in black and wielding knives, arrived at the Kunming train station, one of the largest in southwest China, and began slashing people at random. Before authorities could stop them, the assailants had killed 29 people and wounded another 143. It was the second worst terrorist attack in the history of the People's Republic of China, not including a series of bombings in Shijiazhuang in 1998, which killed 108 people. These, however, were carried out for personal, not political reasons. It was also China's second most lethal transportation attacks.

Does this event indicate that these types of assaults may spread to other nations? We certainly have seen public attacks before, although with slightly different tactics and methods. When we examine the details from this latest case, what are we learning?

The tactic of multiple armed attackers killing as many as possible at a transportation center, tourist site, or shopping mall recalls the 1997 Luxor massacre in Egypt, in which six terrorist gunmen attacked tourists trapped inside a temple, killing 62—slashing many of them with machetes during the 45-minute rampage before the attackers were gunned down by police. In the 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai, two of the ten gunmen opened fire on passengers in Mumbai's Central Railway Terminal. During the next 90 minutes, the two killed 58 (one-third of the fatalities in the Mumbai attack) and wounded 104. In 2013, four gunmen attacked shoppers at the Westgate shopping mall In Nairobi, killing 67 and wounding over 200 during the 80-hour siege.

Kunming attackers were armed with knives, not bombs

The Kunming attack was strikingly different in that the attackers in this case were armed not with guns or bombs, but only with knives. Guns are difficult to obtain in China. Attacks involving knives, axes, cleavers, or other readily available tools are more common. Between 2010 and 2012, lone knife-wielding attackers killed 25 and wounded more than 100, mainly small children, in a spate of unconnected attacks at schools. In 2009, residents of Urumqui, the capital of China's Xinjiang Province, were targets of a series of stabbings with syringes; 531 people reported being attacked, although authorities could find evidence of wounds on only 171 of them. Almost all victims were Han Chinese, who comprise about 40 percent of Xinjiang's population. The accused attackers were Uighurs, Turkic-speaking Muslims who comprise about 43 percent of Xinjiang's population. The syringe attacks followed violent riots, which had occurred a month earlier when protesting Uighurs began attacking Han merchants. Nearly 200 were killed.

Although no group claimed responsibility for the recent attack in Kunming, Chinese authorities quickly blamed Uighur extremists. Uighurs, who comprise a majority of the population in China's far western region, resent Chinese domination. Some demand more respect for human rights, some seek greater autonomy, a few demand independence for the geographic area they call East Turkestan. Uighur resistance is persistent, but inchoate. In recent years, one stream of Uighur separatism has taken on a more militant Islamist complexion reflected in the shadowy East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). The United States designated ETIM a foreign terrorist organization in 2001 but later removed it, stating it no longer had any operational capacity. Although some analysts say that ETIM has many supporters, and reports credit the ETIM with

more than 200 terrorist attacks between 1990 and 2001, others expressed skepticism about its operational capabilities.

Several attempts have been made, some successful.

Since 2001, Chinese authorities have blamed ETIM or Uighur separatists in general for a number of terrorist plots and attacks. Several plots were uncovered in 2008, raising concerns about security at the Beijing Olympics later that year. In March 2008, authorities claimed that an attempted sabotage of a commercial flight between Urumqui and Beijing had been foiled when crew members discovered flammable material in the plane's restroom. In August, suspected ETIM militants drove a truck into a group of jogging policemen, then got out of the truck and attacked the group with machetes, killing 16. Six days later, seven men, armed with homemade explosives, crashed taxis into government buildings.

Another attack involving the tactic of crashing a vehicle into a target occurred in 2010 when six Uighur men reportedly drove an explosives-filled truck into a group of police officers. In 2011, Two Uighurs driving a hijacked truck mowed down pedestrians on a crowded street in Kashgar, and then started slashing people with knives. Eighteen people died. In 2012, six Uighur men attempted to storm the cockpit and hijack a flight bound for Urumqui, but they were overpowered by the crew and passengers.

In June 2013, 17 knife-wielding men attacked a police station and government building in Xinjiang Province; 35 people were killed. And in October 2013, a car was deliberately driven into a crowd in Beijing's Tienanmen Square, catching fire and killing five people. Five suspects, all Uighurs, were later arrested for what authorities described as a terrorist attack.

Attacks in China have been highly lethal.

The Mineta Transportation Institute's database of terrorist and serious criminal attacks on surface transportation shows 24 incidents in China since 1982. These have resulted in 181 fatalities and 526 injuries, including the Kunming attack. That puts China in 26th place among nations in the overall number of attacks. However, these attacks have been highly lethal, placing China 15th in the average number of fatalities per attack. Eight of the attacks are credited to Uighur or Muslim separatists. The remaining attacks were carried out by unknown individuals or groups. (The opacity of news media in China makes it difficult to assess responsibility and motives.)

Eighty-three percent of the attacks have been directed against buses and bus stations, and the remaining 17 percent against trains and train stations. Twenty-one of the 24 attacks involved improvised explosive devices or simply using dynamite. The three most lethal attacks were the February 1998 bus bombing in Wuhan City, which killed 50 and injured 30; the recent Kunming knife attack (which, as noted above, is one of the most lethal transportation attacks in China); and finally, a June 1989 explosion of dynamite that was placed in a train passenger toilet between Hangzhou and Shanghai. That explosion killed 20 and injured 11.

What have we learned?

So, what have we learned from the Kunming attack? While 24 attacks on surface transportation over a 22-year period do not indicate a determined terrorist campaign or a major threat, the Kunming attack does represent an escalation in the violence. The incident once again demonstrates that, even when armed only with knives, a group of determined attackers can cause a high number of casualties. In this case, each of the eight attackers killed an average of three

people and wounded another 18 before being stopped. That, however, is significantly fewer than the casualties caused by gunmen in Luxor, Mumbai, and Nairobi, or by the use of improvised explosive devices in previous attacks in China. It is apparent that, whether dealing with shooters or knife-wielding assailants, only prompt armed intervention halts the killing.

The event in China does not indicate a specific terrorist threat outside of China, nor are we likely to see bands of knife-wielding attackers in Western capitals. However, coupled with last year's bombings of buses and the train station in Volgograd, Russia, it does suggest that terrorists worldwide continue to see surface transportation and train stations as venues for mass casualty attacks.

ABOUT BRIAN MICHAEL JENKINS

Brian Michael Jenkins is an international authority on terrorism and sophisticated crime. He directs the Mineta Transportation Institute's (MTI) National Transportation Safety and Security Center, which focuses on research into 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 authored several books, chapters, and articles on counterterrorism, including *International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict* and *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?* Most recently, he published *When Armies Divide*, a discussion about nuclear arms in the hands of rebelling armies. He also has been principal investigator for many peer-reviewed security-focused research reports for MTI.

ABOUT BRUCE R. BUTTERWORTH

Mr. Butterworth has worked at congressional, senior policy, and operational levels, including with the House Government Operations Committee, Department of Transportation, and the Office of the Secretary. He managed negotiations on air and maritime services in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) (now the World Trade Organization), chaired U.S. delegations to United Nations committees, and was part of the response to the bombing of Pan Am 103. He was an executive in airline security, and he launched a successful program of dangerous-goods regulation and cargo security after the 1995 ValuJet crash. He worked closely with Congress and other federal-level agencies and departments. Currently, he is a research associate at the Mineta Transportation Institute. Mr. Butterworth received an MS degree from the London School of Economics and a BA degree from the University of the Pacific (magna cum laude). He was a California State Scholar and a Rotary Foundation Fellow.

ABOUT THE MINETA TRANSPORTATION INSTITUTE (MTI):

MTI conducts research, education, and information transfer programs focusing on surface transportation policy and management issues, especially related to transit. MTI was established by Congress in 1991 as part of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act and won national re-designation competitions in 2002, 2006 and 2011. The Institute is funded by Congress through the US DOT Research and Innovative Technology Administration, by the California Legislature through Caltrans, and public and private grants. In 2006 the US Department of Homeland Security selected MTI as a National Transportation Security Center of Excellence. The internationally respected members of the MTI Board of Trustees represent all major surface transportation modes. MTI is the lead institute for the Mineta National Transit Research Consortium, an affiliation of nine university transportation research centers. MTI is affiliated with San Jose (CA) State University's College of Business. Visit transweb.sjsu.edu