

OIL SPILL PLANNING AND RESPONSE IN A TERRORIST ENVIRONMENT REAL LIFE EXPERIENCES¹

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ABSTRACT

The world's perspective on security issues had greatly changed after the events of the 9/11 incident. Great strides to enhance maritime security were made following that incident. We see nations working together for a safer environment as seen in the rapid adoption and implementation of the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code in July 2004.

Historically, most oil spill response activities took place in coastal waters and coastlines due to collision and grounding of vessels. We must now also consider the possibility of oil spills occurring in 'non traditional' areas due to terrorism and piracies.

The threat of terrorism is very real. The "USS Cole" at Aden, Yemen on October 2000 and "MT Limburg" off the coast of Yemen on October 2002 were examples. Many regions of the world with high maritime traffic are considered hot spots for such terrorist and piracy activities. For instance, certain parts of the Malacca Strait are known for piracy and sea robberies. These activities may well lead to major oil spills. Vessels are considered "soft targets" for a terrorist attack. These incidents will generate high publicity and may create devastating environmental damage. The consequences are too severe for us to ignore as the economic impact may cripple the global economy.

Oil spill responses are complex and each incident presents their own challenges. Oil spill response organizations have little exposure when dealing with an incident resulting from a terrorist attack. What considerations are given to the oil spill responder's safety? Oil spill response organisations must factor in such scenarios into their contingency plans. In the bigger picture of a major incident the role of the oil spill responder may not be the primary focus of an incident command. They have to be proactive to make necessary preparations and security arrangements with government agencies and security providers.

The author will use the case history of the 'Limburg,' to which the Alliance responded, as an example to illustrate the response and responder security issues that arise during such an event.

INTRODUCTION

Merchant vessels are traditionally used peacefully serving as the backbone to international trade and economy. However, the world is a very different place after the 9/11 attacks and there remains many sea areas bustling with oil and commercial shipping

traffic, where vessels are still facing unconventional threats. The IMO addressed these threats well, through rapid implementation of the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code in July 2004, designed to better prepare vessels and terminals against such security threats.

Superimposing areas of high maritime transportation traffic, piracy activity and terrorism threat level, these identified areas are high risk areas for sea terrorism against vessels. This poses a clear and present danger to ships and the environment. Hence, oil spill organizations have to reconsider policies and positions held in the event of being activated for an oil spill response that result from the act of terrorism. Moreover, the possibility of an act of terrorism being encountered during an oil spill response can't be discounted in such areas.

Recognizing the global security landscape and the high stake of environmental damage arising from oil spill on land or at sea, multi-lateral coordination and integration between stakeholders and response organizations are the keys to a safe and secure oil spill response. The world's security forces and their respective home-front elements like the coast guards, customs and port authorities must work hand-in-hand with industry to enhance multi-agency integration and forge greater multilateral co-operation to protect the lives of responders and streamline operations while responding to an oil spill.

However, no security arrangement or measure could be fail safe and the threat of terrorism will remain a global challenge. Therefore, we as oil spill response organizations must consider the issues and position ourselves effectively so that we can maintain our capability to effectively respond to oil spills without compromising on the safety of our personnel in oil spill response operations.

BACKGROUND

Disturbingly, terrorist organizations have been targeting non military, high profile targets. Not only are their chances of success greater, but if they are successful, their act will make a much more profound statement. This alarming trend has been reported in a few troubled regions around the world. Though cowardly, it has proven to be very successful in getting the world's attention while scoring a symbolic victory over the perceived enemy. There are many such critical waterways and choke points which are highly vulnerable to terrorist attacks. Any act successfully carried out in strategic locations such as these could be so economically and environmentally damaging regionally that our Nation becomes crippled. No peace loving country in the world would be exempted from the terrorist's list of potential target if the opportunity presented itself.

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M.T. Limburg – Yemen, Gulf of Aden.

Sunday, October 6, 2002, on this fateful day, the French-owned oil tanker M.T. Limburg, one of most sophisticated high-security supertankers, was loaded with 400,000 barrels of Arab heavy crude at Saudi Arabia and was on its way to load another 1.5 million barrels in Yemen, when it suffered a USS Cole style ramming which resulted in an explosion that ripped a gaping hole on the vessel's side and spilled about 90,000 barrels of oil and killing one crewman. A thick, black plume of smoke was visible from miles away in the Gulf of Aden marking the position of the fire stricken vessel. This sent a shock wave around the world driving up oil prices and insurance costs. The event was a grim reminder that oil spill incident can now be caused by non conventional incident.

The Limburg's bombers displayed a high level of sophistication and planning. The precise execution shows that had been a close watch on passing shipping from coastal vantage points before launching their attacks. Among intelligence circles, it was believed that the modus operandi bore close resemblance to an Al Qaeda style of operation. This suggested that a well-organized network was behind the attack. The presence of these networks existing in this country [U.S, Yemen or Saudi Arabia?] following this attack is highly possible. Therefore, the stakes are very high for any response organization attempting to conduct clean up operations since secondary attacks may be launched from the remnants of a forward base by the terrorist.

The Alliance Experience

The Limburg release is good example of a successful oil spill response in a high-risk environment to minimize the environmental impacts of the spill. The Alliance was invited to provide technical assessment and recommendations on the spill. Even though tensions were high and security threats and secondary terrorist attacks from extremist groups and sympathizers locally and in the region were real.

Consistent with the Health, Safety and Environment policy of the Alliance, painstaking efforts were made to ensure the safety and security of the responders. Security advice from the British Foreign Office, the client and a security consultant was sought during the pre-deployment phase of the response planning. There was close cooperation with local security forces throughout the response operation. In addition, responders were regularly briefed by security consultants to increase security awareness and background information on political and security issues.

Oil spill response planning and logistical arrangements were carefully thought out and weighed in conjunction with local coordinating agencies. Mitigations strategies developed were consistent with other responses that involved similar environmental conditions and oil types. The main difference was that security arrangements were understandably much higher and strictly enforced throughout the entire event. Local security forces provided security coverage that the operations required.

Much of the success in the form of an incident-free response can be attributed to those measures implemented by the Alliance:

1. The Foreign Office in the UK, client and security risk consultant provided crucial security advice preceding the activation. After careful deliberations and consultation by Alliance management, personnel were briefed and advised of the situation. The decision to participate in the response was ultimately left up to each individual.
2. The Alliance registered its personnel with the British Embassy at Yemen and requested for embassy help in the event of a security crisis in the country.
3. A daily security briefing was conducted for Alliance personnel to ensure better understanding of the situation. These briefings also served to reinforce the adopted security procedures.

4. Security was heightened in the country following the attack and measures were taken to prevent further attacks.
5. All personnel were provided with an armed escort outside of the secured facility of the oil company. The military was placed on a high level of alert and was sent out as escorts in teams of three to four personnel.
6. Extra care and sensitivity was exercised by the Alliance personnel. Due to the high security level and underlying tensions, conducting daily operations were very challenging.
9. Alliance responders were mainly deployed to conduct site surveys and develop clean up plans. They were not physically involved in the actual clean up. We trained 300 locals to conduct clean up operations at the various sites thus effectively acting as force multipliers. Travelling outside secure areas was reduced to a minimum; however for those trips that was essential, personnel were provided with an army escort consisting of four army cruisers and sixteen to twenty strong military personnel.
10. Due to the poor load bearing properties of the soft sand dunes, the army cruisers faced difficulties in accessing and securing the beach where oil spill response activity was to be carried out.
11. A self-imposed curfew was adopted by our personnel outside of working hours to safe guard them against any risk associated in venturing out into the streets especially in the evening.
12. The Alliance worked well and enjoyed good cooperation from multi government agencies, which provided support in the operations.
13. Buddy systems were strictly enforced while conducting the operation.

Some recently adopted security measures

The Department of Homeland Security of the United States of America is a high-powered organization created to coordinate command and control within the Federal and State agencies. One of its primary charges is to ensure multi-agency integration and cohesiveness for all security matters. Although this addresses security issues very well, it creates another layer of 'red tape' during an oil spill response. This 'red tape' will delay immediate response in an oil spill event.

Similarly in the Malacca and Singapore Straits, a proactive tripartite agreement for joint patrol between Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia has been set up recently to address security threats faced by merchant vessels transiting through them. The joint patrolling agreement has lowered the incidence of sea robbery and piracy greatly. By hardening up the region it served as a deterrent for those who threaten the peaceful use of these navigable waters.

Recommendations

Many countries had adopted various security measures and contingency plans after the 9/11 incident. We accept that most of these plans and measures cannot be disclosed to the public for obvious reasons. However, from oil spill response perspective, these additional measures complicate and hamper the speed of a response. This must be understood by all.

During a response safety and security of our personnel is our No.1 priority. The protection provided to us for past incidents was good, and we will continue to need these services for future related incidents. It is important to reiterate that the final decision whether to respond to an incident will always be our call recognizing the advice of various agencies.

CONCLUSION

Responding to an oil spill in a terrorist environment is very different from a conventional spill response. The Alliance had responded to spills in countries and regions which were considered high risk, but this was done only after careful consideration of the risk involved in the operations.

Any future response will be subjected to approval and within the operating parameters of safety and security of our personnel. It is therefore important for oil spill response organizations to constantly update themselves on current security measures in their

areas of coverage. For Tier 3 centers, it will also be important to be aware of extra efforts to put logistics in place after a security incident.

BIOGRAPHY

Daniel joined EARL as an Oil Spill Specialist in May 2003 and moved into his present position as Port Facility Security Officer in April 2004. Daniel has overall responsibility of the security requirements of the Base. Prior to joining EARL, he spent eleven years in the merchant marine, sailing onboard American Eagle Tankers.

