

RETURN OF THE

Incidents involving “white powder” letters have received a great deal of media coverage since the anthrax attacks of 2001 with their headline-grabbing association with bio-terrorism. But the early months of 2014 have seen a resurgence of the relatively unsophisticated but potentially just as deadly letterbomb in the UK, in the USA and even Uganda.

All were sent for very different reasons and had quite different outcomes. In the UK the incident was politically motivated and the devices were successfully intercepted and neutralised; in Kampala a device blew up in the face of an unlucky government aide, while in the USA a retired lawyer was killed. Of the seven crude explosive devices mailed to British Army Recruitment Centres in February 2014, none of the suspicious parcels was opened, none exploded and they were able to be analysed and dealt with by British Army bomb disposal experts using portable X-ray screening equipment and bomb disposal robots. Two further letterbombs, addressed to Maghaberry high security prison in Co Antrim, were fortunately discovered by staff in postal sorting offices. Another pair of explosive packages – one addressed to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) chief constable and the other to one of his senior commanders – were also intercepted by staff at Royal Mail Sorting Offices.

The PSNI believes these attacks are linked to a letter bomb campaign in October 2012, in which republican dissidents sent a series of devices to high profile political and security figures in Northern Ireland. One of the devices was addressed to the seat of power sharing executive at Stormont Castle in Belfast, addressed to Northern Ireland secretary Theresa Villiers. Another bomb was delivered to the offices of the Public Prosecution Service in Derry.

After forensic tests on the explosive packages, security chiefs strongly believe the parcels were sent by associates of a senior New IRA Alliance figure, based in Derry city, Ireland, and a spokeswoman for British Prime Minister, David Cameron confirmed that the devices bore all the hallmarks of “Northern Ireland-related terrorism”. The New IRA Alliance was formed in 2012 by the amalgamation of four established dissident groups, and includes members of the Real IRA, the ONH faction, Derry-based Republican Action Against Drugs and another group comprised of former members of the Provisional IRA.

This recent spate of letter bombs marks the re-emergence of a terror tactic that was used by paramilitaries during the Troubles, and it is believed that sporadic small attacks on the mainland, intended mainly to gain publicity and cause economic disruption rather

Checking the mail: vigilance and screening will prevent letterbombs from reaching their targets



THE LETTERBOMB



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than mass casualties, are likely to be within the capability of these new dissident groups. The UK Defence Secretary, Philip Hammond, stated that “this problem hasn’t gone away, and there has been a continuing drum beat albeit, of course, at a much lower level than it was in the past, but a continuing drum beat of activity from dissident Republican organisations.”

Also in February, thousands of miles away in Kampala, Parliament Speaker Rebecca Kadaga was also targeted by a parcel bomb. On the day the parcel arrived, Kadaga was out of the country and a colleague picked up the parcel from Kadaga’s mail box at the general post office in Kampala.

“When he reached office (Parliament), he opened the parcels and one of them exploded in his face,” a staffer in Kadaga’s office told reporters. Some MPs who were interviewed speculated that Kadaga could have been targeted because of her reported presidential ambitions or for her role in the hurried passing of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in December 2013. “I think these [perpetrators] are the advocates of homosexuality,” said James Kakooza (NRM, Kabula MP).

This sad incident demonstrates how the absence of suspect package awareness skills, mail screening equipment and procedures can have devastating consequences. It also highlights how innocent people can easily become the unintended victim of a letter or parcelbomb attack. Over in the USA, a retired lawyer Jon Setzer, died recently after an unknown package exploded in his house. Law enforcement sources say that a note was recovered from the bombing scene and was believed to have been attached to the bomb, which was powerful enough to extend through much of the house and destroy windows.

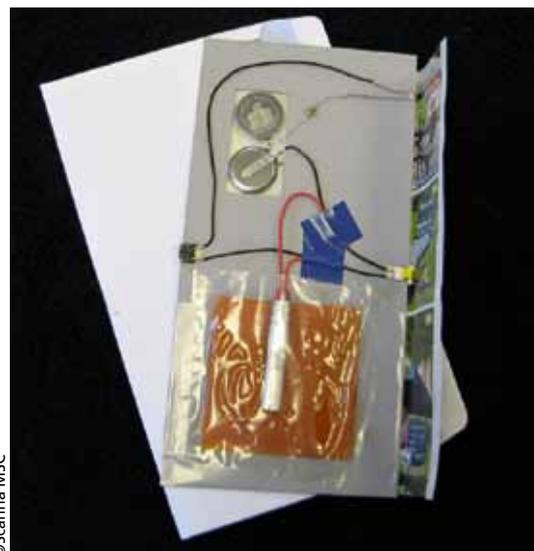
USA bomb expert Joseph Vince, a former ATF agent, believes that, in this particular attacks, revenge against the individual may be a motive. “Clients that didn’t like the way they were represented – or they represented some other client – now this is payback,” he said. “With a note in there, it very well may be some intentional revenge or something, that the attacker – the bomber – wanted to send them a message”. Regardless of the motivation or outcome of these attacks, however, they all demonstrate that the mailbomb is a threat that hasn’t gone away and cannot be ignored.

Where the devices were successfully detected in the UK and Northern Ireland, postal workers and mail handling staff had had training which allowed them to recognise suspicious mail, and screening equipment was available. In the successful attacks, neither victim recognised the packages as potentially dangerous; while it can be argued that very few people would screen equipment at their home, most government authorities will routinely screen their mail.

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In most cases, a letterbomb is designed to do harm to the addressee. Unlike bombs in general, mail devices can be constructed from readily available materials such as fireworks or household batteries, and initiated by something as simple as a party popper. They are usually designed to withstand the delivery process, stand a high chance of reaching their target and they are usually only detonated by the opening process. Even without screening equipment, training to make mail-handling staff familiar with the characteristics of possible letterbombs can help avert a tragedy. Letterbombs often have similar characteristics, such as a fake or non-existent return address, for example. They also often have excessive postage attached to the package because the sender doesn't want to deal face to face with the post office window clerk.

When it comes to installing screening technology, electronic mail screeners will quickly, reliably and automatically detect highly explosive postal devices with no interpretation skills required whatsoever. X-ray equipment is still the most commonly used method for routinely screening mail, and the range of systems available has greatly improved over the last ten years. Procurement, set up and operating costs are now very affordable and good providers can provide advice on proven techniques for screening mail more efficiently and effectively. High-speed conveyorised X-ray screening systems are not designed to isolate and detect small amounts of low-density powder, however, so cabinet X-ray machines that screen in smaller batches may be chosen for smaller volumes of mail.

Even with advanced organic and inorganic material separation and liquid detection software, most X-ray machines still cannot easily identify chemical or biological threats, though hazmat screening technology can be employed if users believe this to be a threat. X-ray scanning systems are perfect for detecting threats that contain high density materials, however, like the metals found in components of improvised explosive devices such as the power source, initiator, explosives and switches, as well as weapons, sharps and blades.

X-ray imaging software has evolved to the stage that dense and possible threat items can be automatically

highlighted and brought to the operator's attention. Pseudo-threats can also be introduced to the operator's display to verify their ability to recognise threat items and to monitor performance and training requirements. Decision-making can also be taken from outside of the mailroom, and analysis can be conducted by an expert with remote viewing or image exporting software.

The lesson we can learn from recent attacks is that the sending of letterbombs has continued to be a very effective way of sending a personal or political message. Postal terrorists are a particular problem, as they are willing to hurt and terrorise anonymously and can act at will – almost at random – with very little planning or organisation required. Thus pre and post-attack intelligence can be difficult to gather. Postal terrorists may range in spectrum from people acting in almost total isolation to those closely influenced by a group or a political motivation, such as the New IRA Alliance, and are chiefly intent on gaining publicity and causing economic disruption rather than creating mass casualties.

Worryingly, US Republican Congressman Mike Rogers believes one of the ideas being adopted by terrorists is that, instead of trying to carry out large, 9/11-style attacks, they increasingly see that, "maybe smaller events are OK, and might still achieve the terrorist goals". This is a big red flag for postal security. The lone terrorist phenomenon currently represents only a small percentage of terrorist incidents, but it has grown in the past few years. In the US, postal inspectors have investigated an average of 16 mail bombs per year over the past few years. While not wishing to overstate the threat posed by terrorists acting alone or in small cell, any organisation is at risk from disruption or real harm for the price of a stamp. Even a hoax letter can cripple operations for hours, costing time and money. A hazardous postal device could shut your office down for days or longer, at great cost to your business.

Regardless of the motivation, the message we must all keep in mind is that letterbombs are still a very real threat and, to guarantee the best outcome, we need to continue to remain vigilant at all times, ensuring we have equipment, trained staff and procedures in place to deal with such threats should we be unfortunate enough to become targeted ourselves in the future.

Above left: a bomb disposal technician prepares to examine a suspicious package. Above right: inside a simple but potentially harmful letterbomb

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