



# GOING NUCLEAR FOR CIVIL DEFENCE

Many governments are coming to the conclusion that a re-think on civil defence is required

**Timothy Compston** reports on why nuclear-related civil defence is high on the agenda after years in the shadows

**W**hen it comes to civil defence – or the lack of it – across the UK, Europe and beyond, the question is being asked: with much of the infrastructure associated with the Cold War sold off, dismantled or mothballed, just how prepared are we should the worst happen? In certain countries – the

UK is a good example – the scaling back of nuclear civil defence provision has been particularly evident, to the extent that some facilities have been turned into glorified tourist attractions. Today, roadside signs even alert the public to the location of what were formerly secret nuclear bunkers. As tensions

continue to mount on several fronts, with Russia, North Korea and Iran being cases in point, many governments and experts are coming to the same conclusion, namely that an urgent re-think on civil defence is required.

Considering the dynamics of the nuclear threat that is driving civil defence thinking, a multi-lateral nuclear-armed world is certainly a more dangerous one, where old constructs like mutually assured destruction (MAD) do not necessarily hold sway. While there may be fewer nuclear delivery systems and warheads around than at the height of the Cold War, the reality is that it only takes one miscalculation for things to escalate out of control, and the more fingers on buttons the greater chance that something will go wrong.

The recent speech by the Russian leader President Putin in March serves to underline that it is not just about having a nuclear weapon that can threaten devastating destruction, but crucially, demonstrating that you have a credible delivery mechanism. Giving his annual Presidential address to the Federal Assembly in Russia he flagged up a number of weapons systems ranging from the new Sarmat (RS-28) ICBM that can put a warhead into orbit; a nuclear-powered cruise missile and a long-range underwater drone; all of which are designed to overcome anti-ballistic missile systems whose footprint has expanded over the past decade and a half since the US side withdrew from the Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty.

## PROTECTING FROM ATTACK

So, what practical measures should countries that feel themselves to be in danger take to protect their civilians? In the first instance, they can take mitigating steps to prevent conflict occurring in the first place, specifically through diplomacy and disarmament. There is the option to use military means to shoot down delivery systems such as ballistic missiles – the Koreans, Japanese and Americans deployed Aegis-equipped ships during the recent tensions with North Korea – although this is not necessarily fool proof. Preparations can also be made to deal with the consequences of any attack. These may include measures such as educating the public regarding the steps they can take, constructing shelters, pre-positioning supplies and considering the medical resources that might be needed. Beyond this, it needs to be considered how any civil defence response is going to be implemented and communicated after an attack and in terms of recovery how damaged critical infrastructure will be brought back online.

The issue of concise and timely communications as part of civil defence efforts, when a ballistic missile – potentially with a nuclear warhead – is incoming, was brought into sharp relief back in January when, during a drill, an employee at the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency accidentally sent out a text message to residents. The message said: "Ballistic missile threat inbound to Hawaii. Seek immediate shelter. This is not a drill." Worryingly, it is reported that the false alarm was not corrected for 38 minutes as the authorities were initially unsure how to change it.

Here in the UK, there are certainly serious gaps in civil defence provision. As mentioned, many nuclear bunkers are no longer operational. Public information efforts like 'Protect and Survive' which were such a

feature of the eighties – and told families how to make a 'fallout room' in their home – are no longer on the radar. Of course, with the end of the Cold War, the threat of global terrorism and the view that any large-scale nuclear confrontation was unlikely for the foreseeable future it is perhaps not too surprising that resources have gone elsewhere.

After what happened in Hawaii at the turn of the year, questions were also naturally posed regarding how the British public would be warned of an imminent ballistic missile attack. Currently, there is not a system similar to the one in Hawaii that can send out alerts to mobile phones, although the Cabinet Office has, apparently, asked telecoms experts to help create something similar and the BBC News was told by a spokesperson from EE – the mobile provider – that the Government was "working with the mobile industry to put this capability in place".

## FOUR-MINUTE WARNING

Staying with potential communication channels, the network of sirens across Britain that were such a feature of Cold War times and came to be associated with the 'four-minute' warning – the time it would take missiles to reach the UK from Russia – are sadly only a distant memory. As technology has moved on it also appears that the analogue National Attack Warning Systems (NAWS), which was created by the Government in the nineties and early in the millennium, working with the BBC, BT and others, to allow warnings to be issued via TV, radio and phone is also no longer at the heart of civil defence

## IN SWITZERLAND ALL INHABITANTS ARE GUARANTEED SHELTER NEAR THEIR HOMES

efforts. Moving forward, it seems that although traditional media will still have a role to play carrying key warnings, further development is likely to be related to channels like text messages, social media and specific apps.

At a global level, one country that has certainly made its mark in the field of nuclear civil defence field is Switzerland, which operates Polyalert. This was developed by the Federal Office for Civil Protection (FOXP), in collaboration with the cantons and other partners, and works with 5,000 stationary sirens linked to a central control system. Communications are carried by armed forces networks and the Swiss secure radio network, Polycom and is also redundancy built-in, should some elements fail, thanks to the ability to utilise ultra-shortwave radio/radio data systems and commercial mobile phone networks.

## GIMME SHELTER

Beyond this, in terms of physical structures the country has created a legal obligation for private individuals and public bodies to build and maintain a system of protective shelters. All inhabitants are guaranteed a place in a shelter near their homes in

the case of an armed conflict. This principle has been implemented in Swiss law since 1963. Since then, the level of provision has been built up to the extent that there is now more than 100 percent coverage. There are small shelters in private houses and bigger shelters with a 100 or several hundred places to provide public infrastructure for those that have no access to a private shelter.

The Nordic countries too are well versed in civil defence. Reflecting heightened concerns about Russia's intentions, Sweden is seeking to reinvigorate its efforts as part of a revival of a total defence doctrine and the future of civil defence, as outlined by the Swedish Defence Commission in a new report entitled *Resilience*, which harks back to Cold War times. The report, which focuses on the 2021-2025 timeframe, admits that: "In the beginning of this century Sweden ended most of its planning for raised alert and war". It advises, among other things, that: "The command structures of civil defence in Government agencies have to be clarified and strengthened".

### CONCRETE DEVELOPMENTS

Concrete developments on the civil defence front in Sweden over the past few years include: closer co-operation on civil defence with neighbouring countries like Finland and Norway; a proposal to double the number of nuclear bunkers in the country over the next 10 years; a new updated version of the *IfWar Comes* leaflet which is to be issued during an Emergency Preparedness Week this May to all homes in the country and a 2016 letter sent to local authorities by the Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) that told them to prepare their civil defence infrastructure and procedures "in terms of war".

Despite the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia too has continued to maintain an extensive civil

defence capability for man-man and large natural disasters. This is symbolised by major annual drills on a scale not seen in the West. These have taken on an added significance given the ongoing tensions over Syria and Crimea, the expansion of NATO and the deployment of anti-missile defences close to Russia's borders. Back in October 2016, for example, 40 million Russians were involved in a four-day exercise which included 200,000 rescue professionals and almost 50,000 vehicles. This massive drill, according to Russian media reports, involved the rehearsal of protective measures for key personnel and the wider population in relation to radiation, chemical and

## IT ONLY TAKES ONE MISCALCULATION FOR THINGS TO ESCALATE OUT OF CONTROL

biological scenarios – among others – as well practising coordination between federal, regional and local authorities; testing contingency plans and accessing the readiness of physical civil defence infrastructure like shelters.

For the future, the increasing potential for states beyond the major powers to create nuclear devices and conceivably integrate them with ballistic missile technology means that more countries are likely to find themselves under threat of attack. The adversarial rhetoric between the US and Russia and their different geopolitical goals is also creating tensions with a nuclear dimension. This new reality is serving as a wake-up call for those tasked with civil defence and there is certainly a real appetite out there for measures that can help to protect citizens, even if they are not as comprehensive as those adopted by countries like Switzerland at the height of the Cold War ●

### Timothy Compston

is a journalist and PR professional who specialises in security issues. He studied International Relations and Strategic Studies at Lancaster University, is PR Director at Compston PR and a previous Chairman of both the National Committee and CCTV PR Committee of the British Security Industry Association.

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