

FOREWORD

Lessons from violent tragedy

Rob Cameron discusses the impact of the Bali terrorist attack on Australia's emergency management arrangements



Candle lighting ceremony at the National Memorial Service held for victims of the Bali terrorist attack at the Great Hall of Parliament House, Canberra, Australia on 24 October 2002.

In the Summer 2001–2002 edition of this journal, Rod McKinnon, the Director of Planning and Operations at EMA discussed the implications for Australia's emergency management arrangements of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington on 11 September 2001. He highlighted the opportunity for Australia's emergency managers to review our arrangements and the level of preparedness for events of a similar nature and foreshadowed a series of lessons learned seminars to be hosted by EMA with guest speakers arranged from the United States.

The violent terrorist bombings in Bali on 12 October tested Australia's capability for managing disaster events impacting on Australians travelling overseas. At the time of writing, the explosions and subsequent fire outside Paddy's Bar and the Sari Nightclub in the popular tourist destination of Kuta in Bali killed 67 Australians with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade holding very serious concerns for another 20 who remain unaccounted for. Indonesian authorities continue to advise that the total death toll is expected to be approximately 180. This is the first time Australian citizens in such numbers have been victims of deliberate terrorist acts outside our national borders, and the extra-territorial dimension has added a layer of complexity and uncertainty.

The observations after the 11 September attacks that prompted Rod McKinnon's argument for the greater integration of Crisis and Consequence Management have been reinforced by experience and national effort following the Bali bombings. With the overriding concern of all involved being the rapid provision of appropriate care to those injured and the welfare of the families and friends of all victims and casualties, effective coordination, cooperation and communication between all the agencies involved was a premium requirement. As noted earlier, the location of the bombings outside Australia, together with the numbers of casualties from each Australian jurisdiction meant that agencies who may not have had such a prominent role in an event that occurred inside our national borders were now very important contributors to, if not managers of, key phases of the response and recovery processes.

In each phase of the Australian response to the 12 October bombings there was and still are a significant number of public and private agencies with responsibilities to discharge and contributions to make. The agencies and companies involved accomplished some remarkable achievements. For example, by early Wednesday following the Saturday night bombing, all Australians requiring hospitalisation had been evacuated and were receiving care in Australian hospitals – a noteworthy effort. As the response continues and the recovery work gathers momentum, it is becoming increasingly clear that this event has far reaching consequences for families and communities, and that a sustained multi-agency recovery effort will be required.

So what can we learn from this tragedy?

Since the attacks in the United States on 11 September, Australia has remained on a heightened security alert. The bombings in Bali confirm the assessment that the alert is valid and is not limited to the Australian

domestic arena. Any likelihood of the need for a multi-agency, multi-jurisdictional and possibly international response indicates our arrangements must be effective and well understood by all those likely to be involved. The requirement for ongoing inter-agency contacts and partnerships entails an appreciation of the interdependencies of respective agencies' roles.

To ensure the experiences and observations of the Bali response to date are captured and made available to the crisis and consequence management communities, EMA has commenced a series of debriefs. The first was held at EMA's Mt Macedon campus on 8 November and focussed largely on opportunities for improvement in inter-agency linkages. Preliminary feedback indicates a need to develop, implement and exercise a national plan for the management of incidents involving evacuation and repatriation to Australia of large numbers of injured and deceased. The next activity in the debrief process will be in Darwin in December and will focus more closely on learning from the experiences and observations of those more closely associated with the initial response. The reports from the EMA-convened debriefs will contribute to Federal Cabinet's decision for a whole of government review of the response to the bombings to be completed by early 2003.

Learning from the Bali bombings needs to be reflected in our plans and arrangements while the experience is current and our observations fresh. We have an opportunity now to use the experiences of those involved in the response to and recovery from both the 11 September attacks and the Bali bombings to ensure that where required, our arrangements are improved. We need to learn from violent tragedy.

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