

A new policing dynamic in emergency management

Mick Keelty provides an insight into the AFP's national and international roles in emergency management

An emergency incident 27 years ago led to the formation of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and an ironic twist in the history of Australia's emergency management.

When a bomb exploded at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting at Sydney's Hilton Hotel in 1978, it killed three people, injured scores more, and exposed weaknesses in the co-ordination of Australia's disaster response system.

As part of the Australian Government's response to the incident, the AFP was founded in the following year as the national policing agency. However, it has only been relatively recently that the organisation's capacity in disaster consequence management has been exercised beyond the local level.

Responsibility for responding to emergencies in Australia has traditionally been with State and Territory authorities, such as

policing agencies, fire, ambulance and other emergency services providers. The AFP's community policing arm, ACT Policing, undertakes this operational role in protecting the Australian Capital Territory, and has been tested at times through incidents such as the 2003 Canberra bushfires and the 'white powder' incidents of 2005.

However, the mainstream AFP has been traditionally focused on taking the fight against crime offshore, in areas such as illicit drug trafficking, fraud and people smuggling.

After the September 11 terrorist attacks, and with the onset of the so-called international 'security environment', emergency situations took on challenging new dimensions for authorities. As a result, new opportunities emerged for the mainstream AFP to apply its specialist skills and experience in the area of emergency management – both nationally and abroad, and at operational and strategic levels.

Since that time, AFP expertise in disciplines such as international policing, forensics, post-blast analysis and disaster victim identification have increasingly been sought by international authorities in response to disasters – both natural and man-made. These have included incidents such as the Bali bombings of both 2002 and 2005, the J W Marriott Hotel bombing of 2003, the Australian Embassy bombing in Jakarta in 2004, numerous bombings in southern Philippines and Thailand, and significantly, the Indian Ocean tsunami on Boxing Day 2004.

The AFP has provided this expertise in the form of Offshore Rapid Response Teams, specially convened to respond to individual disaster situations. These teams, often supported by State and Territory police, enable personnel with the appropriate mix of skills to be marshalled and deployed soon after tragedy strikes.

This experience overseas and the AFP's capacity as the national policing agency are now being used to enhance emergency response strategies here at home. A key development in this regard has been the shift toward proactive initiatives, which aim to prevent emergencies as well as respond to them.

State and Territory police still retain overall responsibility for control of emergency situations, and the AFP has a role in co-ordinating policing responses to promote a more uniform national approach. This is occurring particularly in areas such as counter-terrorism and aviation security, through initiatives such as



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the Joint Counter Terrorism Teams, Regional Rapid Deployment Teams and the recent announcement of AFP-appointed Airport Security Commanders, who will control security at major Australian airports.

So how is this new policing dynamic boosting emergency response capability at a practical level? There are many illustrations of this, but some of the strongest impacts to date have become apparent during offshore disaster responses.

International

The first (and arguably biggest demonstration) came with the Bali nightclub bombings of October 2002. After a series of terrorist bombs exploded in the popular Kuta nightclub district, killing more than 200 people (88 of them Australians) the Indonesian National Police (INP) requested assistance from the AFP for the emergency response.

Experts in fields such as forensics, post-blast analysis, intelligence, investigations and disaster victim identification were quickly mobilised and deployed to Indonesia. At the height of the investigation more than 120 Australian police, including State and Territory representatives, were on the ground in Bali working alongside the INP. These teams were well supported in Australia by personnel based at the Incident Coordination Centre at AFP headquarters in Canberra, as well as by teams at Major Incident Rooms in Australian capital cities, who assisted with collecting and co-ordinating the flow of information.

While primary responsibility for managing the disaster lay with the INP, Australian police closely supported their Indonesian counterparts and their contribution was regarded as integral to some early breakthroughs and the ultimate success of the investigation. So far 36 people have been convicted in relation to the 2002 bombings.

The operation – codenamed *Operation Alliance* – became the largest in the AFP's history, and is now widely regarded as having set a new benchmark in regional law enforcement co-operation. Since then, the AFP has received many more international requests for assistance in the wake of disasters – particularly terrorist bombings – in South East Asia and in countries such as Spain, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

In the aftermath of the London bombings in July 2005, the AFP also led an Australian team to observe the investigation and identify areas that could help with improving responses to these and other types of emergencies. From this we learnt much about how to preserve crime scenes while quickly restoring order to affected areas, as well as special arrangements between law enforcement and business to promote information exchange, intelligence and stronger security.

But terrorist attacks are only one example where the AFP's capacity for responding to catastrophic emergencies has been put to the test in recent years.

The Indian Ocean tsunami that struck on Boxing Day 2004 provided new opportunities for the organisation to work beyond the crime environment in a more humanitarian-style capacity – an area traditionally outside the law enforcement domain. Soon after the tsunami swept over the resort island of Phuket, the Thai Government requested AFP assistance to co-ordinate the international disaster victim identification process.

During the first Bali bombings in 2002, Australian police used a special five-phase victim identification process, involving internationally-agreed standards for recovery, retrieval and reconciliation procedures. These protocols were applied at the International DVI Coordination Centre in Phuket by law enforcement representatives

from more than 30 countries. By November 2005 the Centre had successfully identified more than 2600 bodies. An AFP team still remains in Thailand today as part of that operation, with less than 1000 bodies still to be processed.

In addition, much of the AFP's work offshore is now focused on the prevention of international humanitarian disasters, through peacekeeping and regional assistance. Today, we have hundreds of members deployed to locations such as the Solomon Islands, East Timor and Sudan. They are working to restore law and order and promote stability in these countries, which are essential to preventing the outbreak of emergencies in the future.

Overseas experiences such as these are continually strengthening policing capabilities, with the knowledge being applied to inform the development of strategies to prevent emergencies, particularly terrorist attacks, here in Australia.

National

Unfortunately there has been growing evidence to suggest the threat of terrorism in Australia is very real. Extensive resources worth more than \$6 billion are being dedicated to improving strategies for prevention and response in this area. These are overseen by the National Counter Terrorism Committee, of which the AFP is a member alongside senior State and Territory policing colleagues.

The Committee is promoting unprecedented levels of emergency management co-operation around the country, with a large number of agencies involved. These include intelligence, emergency services, defence, protective security agencies and various other Commonwealth government departments. Not only is the Committee overseeing Australia's preparedness for dealing with all aspects of emergency responses, ranging from recovery processes to formal investigations



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and post-disaster analysis; but it is also focused on related areas such as border control, transport security, critical infrastructure and information management protection. These form an integral part of national emergency prevention strategies.

A key initiative in this area is the Joint Counter Terrorism Teams. Today, there are 11 Joint Counter Terrorism Teams located around Australia, consisting of federal agents and their State and Territory counterparts to ensure broad coverage across all jurisdictions. Their role is to investigate suspect terrorist activity and to arrest and prosecute those found to be involved in supporting terrorist activities both within Australia and overseas. They work closely with our intelligence and law enforcement partners to mitigate the risk of terrorism and play a lead role in national counter-terrorism emergency exercises, including the recent *Mercury 05* operation, which tested emergency management responses in the event of co-ordinated terrorist attacks around the country.

The formation of these joint teams reflects the changing nature of

crime in the security environment. In the past, emergencies tended to be relatively contained in nature. But incidents over recent years – such as in New York and Bali – show the stakes have become much higher. Advances in technology and knowledge mean the capacity now exists within the general community to commit offences that easily cause mass casualties. This new proactive approach to emergency management involves capitalising on the potential from collective responses and making large investments in initiatives that work to prevent such emergencies.

On this front, the use of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) explosives pose a real and growing threat. These non-conventional forms of warfare are now considered within the realms of terrorist capability and the solution to detection and defence also lies across a number of agencies.

For the AFP's part, as well as providing protective services capability at major national scientific institutions, we are also establishing a CBRN Data Centre to help overcome current gaps and vulnerabilities in Australia. Based on a combination of Australian Intelligence Community and law enforcement data, the CBRN Data Centre will provide technical CBRN intelligence, information and advice to all Australian governments. Once a domestic capability is established, the CBRN Centre will contribute to wider government capacity building and information sharing, and provide assistance to regional countries in developing their domestic CBRN management capability.

Conclusion

If there has been a silver lining to the dark cloud of terrorism over recent years, it has been the unprecedented levels of co-operation that have flowed in the aftermath of critical incidents around the world. These experiences have enabled us to identify and address weaknesses in our own prevention and response systems, particularly in regard to critical incident command, communication, division of responsibilities and jurisdictional obstacles.

One of the key findings from the 9/11 Report in the wake of the attacks on the United States, was a "failure of imagination" by authorities in the lead-up to the attacks. Much has been learnt internationally since that time and Australia's strategic approach to emergency management is ensuring we are better placed than ever before to anticipate and thwart potential security-related emergencies. But emergency management remains an evolving phenomenon, encouraging us to continually search for new ways of strengthening our responses and make better use of existing resources in line with the changing environment.

The AFP is pleased to have become a more active partner in this process by using its skills and experience in the national and international arenas, to address the burgeoning array of emergency management challenges that the 21st Century presents.

Author

AFP Commissioner Mick Keelty APM has more than 30 years experience as a police officer in Australia and overseas and was appointed to the role of AFP Commissioner in April 2001. He also Chairs the Board of the Australian Crime Commission, and holds a number of executive positions on national and international law enforcement bodies.