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Rep. Pittenger offers tips to prepare for terrorist attacks

Expert on terrorism says Charlotte lawmaker's brochure is 'irresponsible' fearmongering

By Franco Ordonez
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Many of those so-called "go bags" – the medicine kits and boxes of canned food and water that Americans stockpiled after the 9/11 attacks – have expired, been lost or gone bad.

Rep. Robert Pittenger, R-N.C., says it's time to pack a new emergency bag and draft updated evacuation plans in preparation for another terrorist attack. He's put together a "how to" handbook to help his 9th Congressional District constituents and other members of the public plan what to do.

"I was a Boy Scout, and the motto of the Boy Scouts was to be prepared," Pittenger said.

The chairman of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare said his handbook was inspired by growing concerns about terrorism and the Islamic State group. U.S. intelligence officials say that more than 100 people from the United States have traveled to Syria to fight there. Authorities fear those people might return radicalized and trained to carry out their own attacks on U.S. soil.

Americans can alleviate anxieties, Pittenger said, by learning as much as they can about how to survive an attack.

But some who study terrorism threats see the manual, and its graphic pictures of mushroom clouds, as backhanded not-so-subtle fearmongering.

"To prepare for an emergency, that's a perfectly reasonable thing to do, and people are not very good at that," said John Mueller, an Ohio State University political science professor who studies threats. "But to heighten all this terrorism seems pretty irresponsible to me."

Pittenger's handbook has chapters on terrorist hazards, explosions and nuclear blasts. North Carolina experiences tornadoes, weather-related power outages and the annual threat of hurricanes. Although Pittenger says the book is also intended to assist citizens with natural disasters, there are no chapters dedicated to them.

Sharing the data

It's more likely that an American will be killed in a car accident or drown in a bathtub than die in a terrorist attack.

The annual risk of being killed in an attack here is about 1 in 4 million, according to decades of data from the Global Terrorism Database analyzed by Mueller, author of “Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them.”

Americans were understandably rattled after the Sept. 11 attacks and subsequent threat-level warnings about possible terrorism. At the time, government officials suggested that people buy duct tape and plastic sheeting to protect themselves from chemical or biological weapons attacks.

In October 2001, 46 percent of Americans saw terrorism as the most important problem facing the U.S., according to Gallup polls. The numbers fell as years passed with no significant attacks. By 2011, only 1 percent named terrorism as the top problem, Gallup found.

Fears are on the rise again, however. In February, after a rash of beheading videos from the Islamic State and a January attack on a French newspaper’s offices, 8 percent of Americans named terrorism as the nation’s most important problem, according to Gallup. And more people report dissatisfaction with security from terrorism.

Pictures of mushroom clouds don’t faze Jack Tomarchio, former deputy undersecretary for intelligence and analysis operations at the Department of Homeland Security. It’s important for officials to share good data with the public, he said, which he thinks could offset fear, innuendo and rumor.

“The more good information that people can digest easily and quickly without getting into jargon is a good thing,” he said.

‘False sense of security’

Many Americans, including some Charlotte-area residents in Pittenger’s district, don’t see terrorism as a significant threat because they don’t live close to hot spots such as New York or Washington. But Pittenger said that wasn’t a reason to be complacent.

“We have a major banking center,” Pittenger said, referencing the headquarters of Bank of America. “We have two nuclear power plants in this region. We have a major airport. We’re not out in the middle of Kansas somewhere. We’re in a major region.”

Pittenger’s handbook includes a common-sense list of items that would be useful in various emergencies and natural disasters.

They include first-aid supplies, a flashlight, duct tape, a battery-powered radio with extra batteries, and special items such as medicine and baby formula.

Much of the list is compiled from the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Ready.gov website on emergency preparedness.

But the 22-page handbook also includes graphic photos of mushroom clouds and the damaged Pentagon after the 9/11 attacks.

“They see tougher pictures on TV every night,” Pittenger said. “It (violence) is throughout the media. I think the public has recognized we have a concern.”

Former FEMA Director R. David Paulison said he'd likely have taken a softer approach with the language and layout but added that most people could benefit from an emergency plan.

"It doesn't matter whether it's a terrorist event or not. It could be a gas explosion," said Paulison, who served under President George W. Bush. "What do you do with a hurricane coming in? How do you prepare for an earthquake? How do you prepare if something catastrophic happens to your building? Where are you going to go?"

At his North Carolina home, Pittenger keeps his emergency kit – a metal box – in the basement near his tools. The box includes water, canned food and a radio.

Americans can no longer feel protected by the surrounding oceans, Pittenger said. He called them a "false sense of security."

"Let's just think smart," he said. "Let's don't think after the fact."