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Getting ready for anything: How to guard against WMD

By Joseph Picard

Lethal amounts of smallpox released in New York, or Los Angeles; a dirty bomb filled with deadly chemical agents exploded at a major airport; a cell of terrorists detonating a black market nuclear device in D.C.

Nightmare scenarios that no one wants to think about. But thinking about these and other chilling possibilities is exactly what we should be doing, according to Reps. Bill Pascrell, D-NJ, and Peter King, R-NY - thinking, planning and preparing for possible attacks by weapons of mass destruction..

"Almost nine years after 9/11, we still do not have a comprehensive national strategy to counter the grave threat that WMD pose to our nation," the Congressmen said in a joint release last month.

Pascrell and King, both members of the House Committee on Homeland Security, are co-authors of the WMD Prevention and Preparedness Act of 2010, which will have a hearing in that committee today.

"With bipartisan support, the bill is moving right along," said Paul Brubaker, spokesman for Pascrell. "It was introduced the second week in June, has had one hearing so far and we're already looking at marking it up. I don't want to pretend I can read the future, but the prospects for this bill becoming law in a short period of time are certainly looking good."

In January, the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction, a bipartisan panel established in 2007 by former President George W. Bush, and headed up by former U.S. Senators Phil Graham, D-FL and Jim Talent, R-MO, issued a report card on how the nation was doing in following the commission's recommendations and dealing with WMD security problems.

Of 17 grades, the report card includes three "F" grades: on rapid and effective response to bioterrorism; Congressional oversight of homeland security and intelligence; and national security workforce recruitment.

"We are also enormously frustrated about the failure of Congress to reform homeland security oversight," Senator Talent said. "The Department can't do its job, if it is responding to more than 80 congressional committees and sub-committees. This fragmentation guarantees that much of what Congress does is duplicative and disjointed."

The commission has since disbanded, but Pascrell and King have taken up its work. Their bill has received the ringing endorsement of both Graham and Talent.

"We recognize that there is a gaping hole - we don't have a game plan for dealing with the WMD threat," Brubaker said. "Yes, it's a mammoth task, but we have to start somewhere."

Brubaker said, that because of the diverse nature of the threats - there being so many different kinds of WMD and different ways of using them - the legislation takes a "360 approach."

"We have to have a game plan in place - one that takes in prevention, preparedness and recovery - for each possibility," he said. "We need to put points

on the board in each area."

Brubaker used one of the "F" scores, the current lack of preparedness for a biological assault, as an example.

"We do not have a plan for mass vaccinations following a biological attack," he said. "We don't have a plan for stockpiling vaccines, or a plan on distribution, or on who should be treated first. We need intelligent planning and that's what the bill insists on."

Another area of concern the WMD bill aims to address is cooperation among federal emergency response agencies.

"There are 16 federal agencies involved and we need better cooperation among them," Brubaker said. "State and local agencies are cooperating, and cooperating with federal agencies. But the federal agencies need to do better among themselves."

The bill outlines a process of cooperation among federal agencies, mostly under the Department of Homeland Security, and reaching down to the state and local levels. It also calls for increased security at the nation's biological labs, increased transparency of plans and community involvement, more training and guidance for first responders, more guidance in remediation and recovery from an attack, and increased vigilance at national ports of entry.

"The WMD Prevention and Preparedness Act of 2010 is in fact an extensive blueprint to address the greatest catastrophic risk we face," Pascrell said earlier this month.

Justin Logan, an analyst at the Cato Institute, said, that while it is true the country needs a better plan for dealing with threats of WMD, the current bill, although it has bipartisan support, is not free of the political component.

"It's hard to avoid the conclusion that some political rear-end covering is going on here," Logan said. "They all want to be able to say they are doing something. The threats are real. But the attacks are not likely to be so dramatic as the bill's language indicates.. It's more likely that attacks in this nation will be more low-tech, along the lines that terrorists have an easier time doing."

Logan said a low-tech terrorist could use "firecrackers and fertilizer" - alluding to the aborted bombing attempt in New York's Times Square on May 1 this year - or "several people in several different places opening up at the same time on crowds with guns and bombs" - referring to the attacks in Mumbai in November 2008, which claimed 185 lives.

"These were not high-tech operations involving expensive weapons and chemicals, and other hard-to-get materials," Logan said. "They can be very effective for spreading terror. Imagine terrorists with machine guns or pipe bombs at malls. And they are the kind of attacks that cannot be game-planned."

Logan agreed that people should face the realities of the world we live in.

"But there is a tendency to conflate the viciousness of the enemy with the gravity of the threat," he said. "Are there diabolical people in the world who want to kill Americans? Yes, there are. But are these same people intelligent, and organized and capable of acquiring, transporting and using high-tech weapons to wreak havoc? That is not as high a possibility as politicians are making out."

Logan said fear is natural enough, but not always logical.

"It's scary to think of falling from the sky in an airplane, or being poisoned in some chemical attack," he said. "But what are the odds of that actually happening to you? Car crashes, on the other hand, take about 40,000 lives a year. There is a much greater risk of being in a car crash than falling victim to a terrorist attack. Yet

people hardly think of it, drive around without their seatbelts every day."

Supporters of the WMD prevention bill are hopeful of having it passed by both Houses before lawmakers go on break for July 4.