Explosives Used in Most U.S. Terrorist Attacks Overall but Rarely in Recent Attacks

Following the discovery of two suspicious packages containing explosive materials on cargo flights ultimately bound for Chicago, Illinois, START has compiled background information on terrorist activity in the United States, religious targets, and the use of package and letter bombs.

Key findings, for the time period from 1970-2008:

- Explosives were used in 45% of all attacks worldwide and more than half of all terrorist attacks in the U.S.
- Explosives use in terrorist attacks in the U.S. dropped dramatically, while use of incendiary devices increased by 160%.
- Chicago ranks 6th among U.S. cities for frequency of terrorist attacks, behind New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Miami, and Washington, D.C.
- Terrorist attacks against religious targets in Chicago have been extremely rare.
- While most terrorist attacks in and around Chicago have been non-lethal, global attacks by Al Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) tend to be very lethal.

According to START Director, Gary LaFree, “The foiled package bomb attack may be emblematic of a new era in post-9/11 terrorism, where al Qaeda and its affiliates probe our defenses, looking for weak spots.”

For the full background report, see:
http://www.start.umd.edu/start/publications/br/Background_Report_Package_Bombs_Cargo_Planes.pdf. The background report includes information on:

- Terrorists’ Use of Explosives
- Targeting Airplanes with Explosives
- Al Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)
- Terrorist Activity in Chicago
- Religious Targets in the United States

These data were collected and compiled from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD, www.start.umd.edu/gtd). The GTD contains information on more than 87,000 terrorist incidents that have occurred around the world since 1970. An updated version of the database, with information on incidents through 2008, was released in May 2010.
GTD is a project of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), a U.S. Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence. START, based at the University of Maryland, College Park, aims to provide timely guidance on how to disrupt terrorist networks, reduce the incidence of terrorism, and enhance the resilience of U.S. society in the face of the terrorist threat. The material presented here is the product of START and does not express the official opinion of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Additional information on START is available at: www.start.umd.edu.

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