CHEMICAL WEAPON GUIDELINES FOR CROWDED PLACES

AUSTRALIA-NEW ZEALAND **COUNTER-TERRORISM** COMMITTEE

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What are chemical weapons?

A chemical is a material that may pose a health hazard or physical hazard, and included compounds that are toxic, flammable or corrosive. Chemicals vary greatly in toxicity – some are highly toxic and can cause immediate or delayed symptoms, others are less toxic and pose a less immediate threat or no threat at all. Chemicals in a gas or liquid state generally lead to greater exposures than solid chemicals. Chemicals can include:

- Substances defined within the Australian Dangerous Goods Code or National Code for Practice for the Storage and Handling of Workplace Dangerous Goods;
- Warfare agents developed for military use but banned since 1997 under the Chemical Weapons Convention e.g. nerve or blister agents;
- Legitimate but harmful household, commercial, or industrial products (e.g. chlorine); and
- Biological toxins, e.g. ricin.

A chemical weapon is a device or mechanism designed to deliberately deploy a harmful chemical. Chemical weapons use the toxic properties of chemical substances, rather than their explosive properties, to produce physiological effects on victims.

The toxicity of the chemical, and its concentration when it reaches people, both determine the severity of the exposure. The concentration of a chemical in the air is determined by a range of variables, including:

- The volatility, state, vapour density and persistence of the chemical;
- The presence and strength of environmental factors (e.g. wind, rain, humidity); and
- The environment in which the chemical is released – enclosed spaces can expose people to more concentrated doses, while chemicals usually disperse more quickly in open spaces.

What are the possible indicators of a chemical weapon attack?

All chemicals act differently and there are no common indicators for all chemical agents. In some cases there may be no immediate and obvious indicators of a chemical weapons attack. Some chemical agents can produce obvious visual signs of exposure in groups of persons, including:

- Eye irritation, visual changes, vomiting and diarrhoea;
- Coughing, breathing difficulties and respiratory irregularities;
- Muscle weakness, paralysis and seizures;
- Skin redness, irritation and burns; and
- Collapse, loss of consciousness, or death.

There may also be obvious visible signs of a chemical weapons attack, including:

- Leakage of gas or vapour, or chemical reaction from an item or substance; and/or
- A powder, liquid, or other substance released from an item or place with no logical explanation.

What is the threat?

Non-state actors have shown the willingness and the capability to use chemical weapons. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has conducted a number of chemical weapons attacks in Syria and has demonstrated intent, along with Al Qaida and other terrorist groups, to acquire, make, and use chemical weapons elsewhere, including in the West.

This threat extends to Australia. Terrorists here may seek to conduct chemical attacks using a variety of different tactics, including some that are relatively easy to employ. Mass casualties are a possibility.

In August 2017, police and intelligence officials disrupted a plot involving the development of hydrogen sulphide gas for use in an improvised chemical dispersal device in Australia. Officials allege those involved in the plot received advice and direction from ISIL.

While terrorist attacks in Australia – and against the West – have trended towards low capability inspired attacks using basic weapons, we also remain concerned by the threat of more complex attacks.

What is the government doing to protect crowded places from chemical weapon attacks?

There is close cooperation between all levels of government, the private sector, and the public on protecting crowded places from terrorism. These arrangements are laid out in *Australia's Strategy for Protecting Crowded Places from Terrorism*, available at www.nationalsecurity.gov.au.

Australia has robust national governance arrangements in place to protect against the use of chemical weapon in a terrorist attack, including inter-governmental agreements, strategies, and policy development through the Australia-New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee.

Commonwealth, state and territory governments work collaboratively with industry to assess the national security risks associated with chemicals of security concern, and have developed a code of practice which is designed to help prevent identified chemicals from falling into the wrong hands. The *National Code of Practice for Chemicals of Security Concern* can be found at www.nationalsecurity.gov.au.

Guidelines for medical staff can be found in *The Australian Clinical Guidelines for Acute Exposures to Chemical Agents of Health Concern: A Guide for the Emergency Department Staff* at http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-exposure-chemical-agents-guidelines.htm

States and territories are responsible for developing, implementing and maintaining disaster and emergency management plans, including a capability to respond to chemical weapon attacks. These plans are integrated with state and territory counter-terrorism arrangements.

Key response agencies for a chemical weapon attack include police, fire, ambulance, and health services. Health authorities and emergency services personnel are well prepared to deal with the consequences of a terrorist attack involving chemical weapons, including having plans in place to respond to an attack and to treat those affected. Other support may be provided from Defence and environmental, forensic, laboratory and welfare agencies.

What can owners and operators do?

There are a range of measures owners and operators can employ to strengthen their ability to detect, deter, delay, and respond to terrorist attacks using chemical weapons. Many of these measures have a broader application beyond chemical weapon attacks and the measures may have already been considered in existing emergency management arrangements and business continuity plans. Further information on implementing effective protective security can be found in *Australia's Strategy for Protecting Crowded Places from Terrorism*.

Owners and operators should:

- Conduct a comprehensive review of current emergency and evacuation plans for their respective businesses consistent with the current national threat level of PROBABLE;
- Ensure staff are aware of their roles and responsibilities within the organisation's emergency evacuation plans;
- Pre-plan your evacuation routes, including identifying alternative routes to minimise people's exposure to contaminated areas;

- Consider how you will communicate evacuation routes to people during an incident;
- Ensure staff are briefed on the possible health effects of a chemical weapon attacks;
- Ensure staff are actively engaged in the conduct of 'white level inspections' around their workplace (see below);
- Ensure staff are aware of the mechanisms for the reporting of suspicious articles and people, including calling 000, local police, the National Security Hotline or Crime Stoppers;
- Remind staff to be vigilant to all unattended bags and articles, and any persons acting suspiciously;
- Develop and implement robust mail screening procedures;
- Consider conducting regular exercises to test your emergency evacuation plans and white level inspection procedures;
- Ensure compliance with security plans and white level inspections through appropriate management and supervision; and
- Ensure access to first aid supplies.

A 'white level inspection' is a visual examination by all staff members of their respective workplace for any articles that are unusual, suspicious, or unable to be accounted for. Employees are most familiar with their respective workplaces and are therefore best positioned to detect foreign or unusual items. Those conducting white level inspections should:

- Inspect all areas accessible by the public at the start and conclusion of operations, e.g. for transport infrastructure, inspections should incorporate all areas of mass passenger vehicles as well as transport terminals;
- Conduct inspections regularly throughout the day;
- Be vigilant to unattended baggage and articles;
- Keep all communal and public spaces tidy, including emptying bins on a regular basis;
- Lock all doors, cupboards, and cabinets that are not in use; and
- Be vigilant to suspicious behaviour and report any suspicious behaviour to supervisors and police.

A potential chemical weapon may be discovered by detecting an unattended or suspicious item. To determine whether an item is suspicious, owners and operators and their employees should apply the 'HOT' principle. Under the HOT principle, anything that is hidden, obviously suspicious, or not typical to its environment could be deemed a security risk. If a suspicious item is found, personnel should:

- Avoid touching, moving, or disturbing the item;
- Attempt to locate the owner of the article by inquiring with people in the area;
- If available, check CCTV footage to determine who placed the article;
- Inform a supervisor, manager, or police if the article cannot be accounted for;
- Record a detailed description of the item, including size, shape, location, and whether it is leaking liquid or unusual odours;
- Take a photo of the article if safe to do so; and
- Consider moving people away from the suspicious item and/or restricting access.

In a crowded place, an attack using chemical weapons may create a level of panic and chaos that is difficult to control. The main objective of any response plan should be to minimise risk to people. In the event of a chemical weapons attack, owners and operators of crowded places should do what they can to protect lives, including:

- Contact and provide information to police and emergency services;
- Where possible, contain the incident or threat;
- Activate existing emergency management and business continuity plans;
- Assess the incident and build situational awareness;
- Clearly provide instructions to staff and patrons;

- If a decision is made to initiate a total or partial evacuation, use existing emergency evacuation plans to evacuate staff and patrons, taking into consideration alternative routes so people are not evacuated through affected areas; and
- Understand and implement the guidance in the next section.

What can the public do?

A number of terrorists worldwide have been detected by bystanders who acted on their initial suspicion that something was 'not quite right' about an individual's activity by reporting this to authorities. Members of the public are often best placed to detect suspicious behaviour. Everyone has a responsibility to report suspicious behaviour to the authorities. In life-threatening situations everyone should call 000. To report a crime or possible criminal activity, call police on 131 444 (in Victoria call 1800 333 000). To report suspicious activity call the National Security Hotline on 1800 123 400.

If a volatile chemical substance is released inside a building or enclosed space, people should:

- Minimise the chance of exposure by moving away from the release and avoiding skin contact;
- Do whatever it takes to find uncontaminated air quickly – exit the enclosed space if they can do so without passing through a contaminated area or break a window to access clean air;
- Follow the directions of emergency responders; and
- When safely away from the chemical source:
  - » Remove outer clothing if contaminated and place in a sealed plastic bag;
  - » Wash with soap and water, flush skin with lots of water, and flush eyes with water if they are irritated;
  - » Put on clean clothes if possible;
  - » Seek medical attention if they have been exposed to the chemical, even if there are no immediate symptoms.
- If a volatile chemical substance is released in an outdoor or open space, people should:
- Avoid any obvious plume or vapour cloud;
- Consider wind direction and move upwind and uphill, if possible;
- If exposed, decontaminate as above;
- If not exposed, walk away from the site and into a building to shelter in place;
- Where possible, seal the building to create a temporary barrier between people and the contaminated air outside – this can include closing doors, closing windows, turning off fans and air conditioning systems, and sealing windows and doors with plastic sheeting and duct tape; and
- Monitor the Internet, TV, and radio for official news and instructions as they become available.