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Updated Thursday and Sunday at 6 a.m.

On alert

Sunday, July 10, 2005

By Glen Leyden, The Star

Hours after Thursday's London bombings, Chicago area police boosted patrols, the government placed the country's transportation system on high alert and Chicagoans were warned to be wary of suspicious activities.

Just how much that immediate response helped is debatable. There is little reason to believe Chicagoans were more at risk Thursday than on any other day.

Even Homeland Security Director Michael Chertoff cautioned that the alert level was raised Thursday despite no "credible information suggesting an imminent attack in the United States."

So what about six months or a year from now, when the patrols are less frequent and the warning level is down. Are we at any less risk of an attack?

Probably not, but the government is expected to do something when television sets show smoke billowing from London subways and terrorists are the likely culprits — even when that attack is half a world away.

Some of it, like increasing patrols at local train stations and changing the alert level, is just for show, designed to put local commuters at

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ease, said Carl Bell, University of Illinois at Chicago professor of psychiatry and public health.

"It's all about an adult protective shield," he said. "It's all about giving people the perception of safety."

Terrorists want to consume their victims' time, mobility and energy, he said. More than 50 people were killed in Thursday's bombings, but many millions more worldwide worried about whether another attack was on its way to their area of the world.

It's the government's initial job to make people feel safe, Bell said.

"Terrorist activity is very rare. They are few and far between, but they are very capable of monopolizing the attention and energy of their victims," he said. "In an effort to counterattack, the government gives off a positive energy of 'We got this. It's under control. We're taking care of it.'"

When commuters see extra police at the train depots and bombing-sniffing dogs smelling garbage cans, it has a calming effect, said security expert and former Chicago detective Arthur Hannus.

Police understand they cannot keep that same level of patrol up year-round.

"Practically speaking, they can't keep these police there all the time. It's just too expensive," Hannus said.

But they don't need to be there all the time. After the initial anxiety, most people quickly return to a normal routine.

"The immediate reaction is exactly what you think it would be: People will be more apprehensive about taking public transportation," Northwestern psychology professor Richard Zinbarg said.

"But the vast majority of people who are apprehensive now, assuming there is not a similar attack tomorrow or next week to keep the fear going, will see that fear and apprehension fade over time. They do not remain psychologically scarred," he said.

Metra officials, who move 285,000 commuters each weekday and have a financial stake in whether commuters decide to change travel plans, also want to give off the impression that everything is okay.

Spokeswoman Audrey Renteria talks about "increased police presence" and "alert" employees who are "taking extra precautions."

This isn't the first time Metra has responded to terror questions. The same questions were asked and the same answers were given following the 2004 Madrid bombings.

Changes, many of which go unnoticed by commuters, have been made since the Madrid attacks but Renteria said she could not talk about them for security reasons.

Transportation officials are installing explosive material detection devices at the entrance to some train stations, Hannus said. They also use undercover patrols and dogs trained to find explosives.

But Hannus and Renteria agree that the primary weapon against terrorists is alert passengers.

"Commuters are creatures of habit. They take the same trains, the same car, and, in some cases, even the same seat every day," Renteria said. "Anything unusual, whether it's a person or a package, is likely to be noticed by our commuters."

Londoners, who lived through IRA bombings and the Nazi Blitzkrieg last century, are probably very aware of their surroundings, too. But four or more bombs went unnoticed Thursday.

Are we to assume that American commuters are more aware than Londoners, or is it just natural for commuters to feel more relaxed the longer the lull between attacks?

In the weeks following a bombing, people are very aware of their surroundings and likely to report suspicious activities, Hannus said.

Over time that fades, and people worry about looking insensitive if they report someone suspicious, he said.

"We need people willing to step up and report suspicious activities," he said.

Law enforcement will not be lulled into relaxing, said Olympia Fields police Chief Jeffrey Chudwin, who heads Region 4 of the Illinois Law Enforcement Alert System, a communication link among local, state and federal authorities.

Police will examine the London attacks, pinpoint areas where similar attacks could be pulled off here and formulate an effective response.

"We live in a world now where this is an everyday issue, but I'm afraid that we've become complacent after Sept. 11," Chudwin said.

He admits it's difficult not to become complacent as life goes back to normal and the memories of the attacks fade. But people need to be conscious of suspicious activities, he said.

Police are much less likely to stop an attack on their own. Alert citizens can make all the difference, he said.

Despite the color-coded alert systems, the newly created Homeland Security Department and billions of dollars spent, few people think we can stop a committed, well-funded terrorist attack.

"We can't control everything that happens. We can't prevent everything that is going to happen," Chudwin said. "Unless we change our government and create a lockdown state and live in a society no one

wants to live in, it can't be done."

There is no room for error.

"For us to be successful, we have to stop the threats 100 percent of the time," Chudwin said. "The terrorists only have to be successful once."

The two most important measures in this war will be won or lost many miles away from Chicago, Hannus said.

"We have to cut their funding, and change their hearts and minds. Neither is going to be easy," he said.

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