

Fact Sheet: TOPOFF 3 Exercising National Preparedness

Release Date: 03/28/05 00:00:00

Top Officials 3 (TOPOFF 3) is the most comprehensive terrorism response exercise ever conducted in the United States. Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Office of State and Local Government Coordination and Preparedness (SLGCP), TOPOFF 3 is the third exercise in the TOPOFF Exercise Series, a congressionally mandated exercise program. The exercise is designed to strengthen the nation's capacity to prevent, protect against, respond to, and recover from terrorist attacks involving weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Joining the Department of Homeland Security and other federal agencies in this important effort are the states of Connecticut and New Jersey, as well as two international partners, the United Kingdom and Canada. These countries will conduct simultaneous, related exercises.

A Weeklong Full-Scale Exercise

The TOPOFF 3 Full-Scale Exercise (T3 FSE), which will take place from April 4-8, 2005, is the culmination of a two-year cycle of seminars, planning events, and exercises. The exercise will involve more than 10,000 participants representing more than 200 federal, state, local, tribal, private sector, and international agencies and organizations, as well as volunteer groups.

In the United States, participants will respond to attacks in Connecticut and New Jersey. Simulated terrorist incidents will originate in New London, Connecticut (chemical incident) and Union and Middlesex Counties in New Jersey (biological incident). Real weapons will not be used, yet the response will be mounted as if they had been. Numerous federal departments and agencies will actively participate, providing a first opportunity to validate the recently released National Response Plan, and to exercise protocols of the National Incident Management System. As the full international dimensions of the simulated crisis are revealed, related exercises will take place in the United Kingdom (ATLANTIC BLUE) and Canada (TRIPLE PLAY). Planners from all three countries have collaborated in the exercise design to achieve shared objectives.

Meeting Crucial Preparedness Objectives

To meet these shared objectives, the T3 FSE focuses on four critical areas:

- Incident management: To test the full range of existing procedures for domestic incident management of a terrorist event and improve, through practice, top officials' capabilities in affected countries to respond in partnership.
- Intelligence/investigation: To test the handling and flow of operational and time-critical intelligence.
- Public information: To practice strategic coordination of media relations and public information issues in response to linked terrorist incidents.
- Evaluation: To identify lessons learned and promote best practices.

Challenging the Entire Homeland Security System

Exercises such as TOPOFF are an important component of national preparedness, helping to build an integrated federal, state, local, tribal, and private sector capability to prevent terrorist attacks on the homeland, and rapidly and effectively respond to and recover from any terrorist attack or major disaster that does occur.

The full-scale exercise offers agencies and jurisdictions a way to test their plans and skills in a real-time, realistic environment and to gain the in-depth knowledge that only experience can provide. Participants will also exercise intelligence gathering, which is critical to preventing terrorist attacks.

Lessons learned from the exercise will provide valuable insights to guide future planning for securing the nation against terrorist events.

The Scenario

T3 FSE begins as terrorists, planning attacks in the New York and Boston metropolitan areas, suspect their plans are compromised. They react by accelerating their original schedule, deploying a vehicle-based biological agent dispersal device in New Jersey. Seriously ill patients begin to overwhelm local hospitals. As the scenario unfolds, every county in New Jersey will need a Point of Dispensing (POD) for antibiotics. Meanwhile, the chemical weapon attack originally planned for Boston is also accelerated and executed in New London, Connecticut, augmented with a vehicle-based improvised explosive device.

Issues to be addressed include public health and safety, contamination, criminal investigation, and patient care. As the events continue, federal agencies implement the National Response Plan, and international aspects of play emerge.

T3: Building From Past TOPOFF Exercises and the Events of September 11, 2001

The TOPOFF 3 Full-Scale Exercise extends the learning derived from earlier TOPOFF exercises and 9-11 in several ways:

- Increases international and private sector participation in prevention and investigation.
- Emphasizes terrorism prevention — an opportunity to piece together an intelligence puzzle and “capture” the enemy before the attack occurs.
- Emphasizes risk communication and public information — participants will explore approaches to public communications in times of high public anxiety and confusion.
- Focuses on long-term recovery and remediation issues.