

Attack shows 'major security loophole' at airports

Analysts say more must be done to protect from ground assaults

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LONDON— Monday's Moscow bombing shows much more must be done to protect the world's airports from ground attacks, a risk long overlooked in the post-September 11 rush to secure passengers in-flight, analysts said on Monday.

After the Sept 11, 2001 airliner attacks, the homeland security industry sharply increased investment in sophisticated detection technology designed to prevent terrorists bent on hijacking or bombing being able to get aboard airliners.

Story: 35 dead in blast at busiest Moscow airport

While understandable given the unprecedented nature of the al Qaeda assault, the campaign was overly focused on in-flight risks and neglected the challenge of protecting passengers and airline staff on the ground, aviation experts say.

Airports as much as government buildings are iconic targets, experts say, and, just as important, are crowded places that offer militants the opportunity to kill large numbers of people gathered in one place.

'Security loophole'

"This is a major security loophole," said Philip Baum, editor of Aviation Security International. "The industry has missed the bigger picture and instead got on with addressing the last-known risk, not the risk to come. We are always reactive."

A suicide bomber killed at least 35 people in the international arrivals hall at Domodedovo, Russia's busiest airport, state TV said, in an attack on the capital that bore the hallmarks of militants fighting for an Islamist state in the North Caucasus region.

Chris Yates, an independent British aviation security consultant, said he had been arguing for years that airport security had been neglected in the rush to stop terrorists getting onto planes.

"Many airports are wide open to anyone walking in and blowing themselves up. It's as simple as that," he said.

Some of the post-Sept 11 airport measures such as body scanners and intensive frisking spawn long queues, which in themselves offer a tempting readymade target for an on-ground militant attack, counter-terrorism specialists say.

The post-Sept 11 dash for more aviation security also missed the point that militants change their tactics constantly to stay a step ahead of authorities, so heightening in-flight security was always going to be an incomplete tactic, they argue.

A case in point is a parcel bomb plot launched in October by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Only a tip-off alerted authorities to the ingenious plan to send explosives rigged in printer cartridges to America in two cargo planes.

Governments, airlines and aviation authorities around the world have been reviewing security since the foiled plot.

It was been more than 20 years since the last spate of major ground attacks at airports: On December 27, 1985, guerrillas of Abu Nidal's Palestinian Fatah Revolutionary Council attacked El Al counters at Rome and Vienna airports simultaneously, killing 19 people.

But Baum says he suspects it is only a matter of time before today's generation of militants attempts to revive the practice.

'Allure of air travel'

"Airports are cosmopolitan. It's international passengers. It's international commerce. It's the whole allure of air travel."

"You immediately harness the media's attention, and you strike a blow at air travel. We overlook the risk at our peril."

An Islamist cell attempted a car bomb attack on Glasgow airport in June 2007, in which one of the two would-be suicide bombers was killed.

In Zamboanga, southern Philippines, an unexplained blast outside an airport killed two and wounded dozens on August 5, 2010 when explosives inside a backpack worn by a man went off.

Security consultants say they worry that the 2008 commando-style raid by Islamist militants on the Indian financial center of Mumbai may have inspired militants elsewhere to plan simple gun and grenade attacks on ground targets.

Ground attacks are attractive for militants because they generally require less precision and preparation than attacks mounted in-flight, counter-terrorism expert say.

Claude Moniquet, the director of the Brussels-based European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center, wrote that Monday's attack showed that by choosing to strike the airport, terrorists showed they were able to inflict devastating casualties near the capital despite stepped up Russian security measures.

"In the last years, worldwide, huge amounts of time, money and technical means were spent on airlines' and passengers' security, but airport security is still a weak point in the global chain of air transport security," he wrote.