



ANTI-TERRORISM

The MANPADS Menace

Taking aim at the shoulder-fired missile threat

Confronting the very real threat that shoulder-fired missiles pose to civil aviation was the subject of an OSCE-sponsored intergovernmental conference on 23 January in Vienna. Experts from Finland, France, the United Kingdom and the United States as well as from NATO, the European Community, the International Civil Aviation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization briefed government representatives on the measures they can take to protect travellers and airports in the OSCE area against this deadly form of terrorist attack.

Shoulder-fired missiles come in three varieties: electro-optical (similar to a camera), laser-guided and infrared (or heat-seeking). Depending on type, they can hit an aircraft as far away as 6.5 kilometres (4 miles) and as high as 4 kilometres (2.5 miles). Photo: Finnish Defence Forces

BY BRIAN WOO

Man-Portable Air Defence Systems, or MANPADS, as they are known, have been in the hands of both state and non-state actors for more than 30 years. The devices have been deployed against civilian aircraft in more than 40 incidents, scoring hits in more than half of them and killing some 600 people.

Why are MANPADS so lethal and why should a MANPADS alert be taken seriously?

They are lightweight, easy to use and simple to conceal. An individual weapon is assembled from four main pieces in as little time as five minutes. Anybody can learn to use one with minimal training. Using a combination of technologies, MANPADS are capable of targeting many types of aircraft. More sophisticated than rocket-propelled grenades, they have a greater range and a guidance system that can latch onto and track aircraft.

Hundreds of thousands of MANPADS exist, including up to a quarter of a million older-generation SAM7s. The availability of the weapons on the black market, both within the OSCE area and on its borders, is a matter of growing concern. We know that Al-Qaida and other terrorist and criminal groups are in possession of MANPADS. They have resorted to them in the past and will no doubt seek to do so again.

A widely held perception is that the problem of MANPADS is relevant only to a few countries and specific sites. But if there is any predictability to the behaviour of international terrorists, it is that they will invariably opt to hit a soft target over a hardened one. Counter-terrorism experts warn that airports in the OSCE region should consider the possibility that they could be targeted by terrorists.

This growing concern was what led the OSCE's Action against Terrorism Unit to invite national counter-terrorism and airport security officials from OSCE capitals to Vienna to meet with international MANPADS and civil aviation specialists. The pioneering effort, made possible with major funding from the Government of Canada and with the co-operation of the Montreal-based International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), resulted in an exchange of practical and action-oriented information on how to make airports in the OSCE region more secure in the face of the MANPADS threat.

The experts agreed that some basic planning and co-ordination among local security officials and with communities around airports can be very effective in addressing the threat, especially in identifying areas that could be ideal launching pads. Solutions discussed ranged from increasing public awareness to installing defensive systems on airplanes.

STOCKPILE SECURITY

Protecting airports from such contingencies is not the only focus of MANPADS-related counter-terrorism work. Controls over stockpiles and exports are also being strengthened. In July 2003, the OSCE's Forum for Security Co-operation agreed "to promote the application of effective and comprehensive export controls for MANPADS". The decision, endorsed by the Ministerial Council in Maastricht, aims at bolstering stockpile security and management, reduction and disposal, as well as improving border controls to prevent illicit trafficking.

Valery Zemskov, representative of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), drew attention to the initiatives of the six-member group, particularly the Russian Federation's voluntary introduction of "unilateral restraints on deliveries of such systems to politically unstable countries and regions".

Mr. Zemskov said the CSTO was prepared to actively support the OSCE and other organizations in their efforts to mitigate the MANPADS menace through unified standards which might also be considered for adoption by other regional organizations such as the OSCE.

Also playing a crucial role is the Wassenaar Arrangement, which in 2003 agreed on a set of "Elements for Export Controls of MANPADS". With an eye towards adopting or supporting best practices and initiatives, the OSCE works closely with this group of 33 conventional arms-exporting countries, 28 of which are also OSCE States.

TOP PRIORITY

French official Bruno Bisson shared the highlights of the G-8 countries' "Action Plan to Enhance Transport Security and Control of MANPADS" which they adopted at their summit in Evian in June 2003. He said that the threat posed to civil aviation by these weapons, especially in the hands of terrorists or States that harboured them,

was clearly uppermost in everyone's mind.

The OSCE should also encourage other regional organizations to support the MANPADS initiative within their spheres of influence, whether it is in Africa, the Middle East or Southeast Asia.

The efforts of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation Forum (APEC) are clearly a major step in the right direction. At their meeting in Bangkok in October 2003, the 21 leaders of APEC agreed to protect international aviation by committing themselves to stricter control of MANPADS and essential components. This includes strongly regulating their domestic production, transfer and brokering, as well as banning their transfer to non-state end-users.

APEC also pledged to strengthen co-ordination efforts in counter-terrorism, including the MANPADS issue, within Asia-Pacific and between APEC's Counter-Terrorism Task Force and the G-8's Counter-Terrorism Action Group, which was launched in June 2003.

At the OSCE meeting, David Carriedo of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee (UNCTC) underscored the importance of strengthening such regional initiatives. "The UNCTC is learning from the work of others on MANPADS and looks forward to promoting the OSCE's efforts in connection with the UNCTC's meeting with international, regional and sub-regional organizations later this year," Mr. Carriedo said.

Although the tasks involved in counter-ing terrorism are daunting, OSCE participating States have unambiguously demonstrated firm political will to tackle current and emerging security challenges in the 21st century: more than 170 representatives from 52 of the OSCE's 55 participating States took part in the January meeting. Significantly, 40 of the 50 OSCE States that have major airports sent key officials from their capitals.

Brian Woo is Head of the Secretariat's Action against Terrorism Unit, which was established in May 2002.



The man-portable nature of the weapons makes them easy to conceal, such as in a large duffle bag. The weapons are typically 1.5 to two meters long (4.9 to 6.6 feet) and weigh between 14 to 18 kilos (30 to 39 pounds).