

Report: Discovery networks hostage-taking a rare terror event

September 2 2010

A new report by terrorism researchers at the University of Maryland concludes that the deadly hostage-taking incident at the Discovery Communications headquarters in suburban Washington, D.C. meets the criteria of a terrorist act - a rare one for media organizations and the nation's capital region. Hostage-taking, though, is a familiar pattern in capital-region terror, the researchers add.

The report from the University of Maryland's START Center - the federally funded National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism - also finds that there has never been any environmentally inspired suicide eco-terrorism in the United States, and probably the world, but draws no conclusions about whether that's what occurred in this case.

START maintains the world's most comprehensive unclassified database of terrorism incidents, and is designed to make it useful to scientists and policy-makers seeking to understand the behavior of terrorists and terror organizations. The report is based on an analysis of this data.

"The use of violence by radical environmentalists is extremely rare, and usually the target is property not people," says Gary LaFree, who directs the University of Maryland START Consortium and its Global Terrorism Database. "We'll count this incident as terrorism - the perpetrator has a history of politically inspired activism and his tactics were violent."

START researchers analyzed the following information in the Global Terrorism Database, which includes more than 85,000 incidents worldwide since 1970:

- Terrorist activity in the District of Columbia and Maryland
- Media targets in the U.S.
- Suicide terrorism in the U.S.
- Hostage situations in the U.S.

The full report is available online.

http://www.start.umd.edu/start/announcements/Background_Report_Discovery_building.pdf

TOP FINDINGS

- Given the nature of perpetrator James Lee's political and social goals and his use of illegal force, this incident would qualify as a terrorist incident, according to the definition of START's Global Terrorism Database (GTD).
- Although hostage-takings like the one at the Discovery Communication's headquarters in suburban Washington, D.C. on Sept. 1 are extremely rare globally, representing less than one percent of all terrorist attacks worldwide since 1970, three have occurred in the District of Columbia.
- Environmentally motivated perpetrators, like the gunman in this event, have been active in the United States since the 1970s.

- Environmentally motivated attacks almost always have no casualties but have caused tens of millions of dollars in property damage.
- In the event that the Discovery Communications attacker indeed wore explosives that he intended to detonate, this would be the first recorded incident of environmentally motivated [suicide](#) terrorism in the United States, and likely the first worldwide.
- Journalist and media targets are rare in the U.S. Prior to the events at the Discovery building, the most recent terrorist attacks on media targets in the United States were the 2001 anthrax attacks, which included targets such as The New York Post, CBS, ABC, and NBC, in New York, and American Media Inc. in Boca Raton, Florida.

Provided by University of Maryland

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