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Lessons Learned from the Madrid Accident 2004

Madrid, 11th March 2004 at 7.39 AM. Three bombs exploded in a commuter train which had just arrived at Atocha central station on platform two. A few seconds later at Santa Eugenia station an explosive device blew apart a train seat. Two bombs exploded at the train station El Pozo. A couple of minutes later four explosions blew up the train from Alcalá de Henares, some 500 meters outside Atocha central station. All of the explosive devices detonated within minutes of each other. Ten bombs exploded in four separate commuter trains, which were transporting thousands of passengers on their daily journey along the route from Alcalá de Henares to the capital.

The emergency services arrived and immediately started the emergency rescue work. SAMUR set up an emergency medical station inside the sports centre, Daóz Velarde at Téllez street, and another emergency medical station at the railway station Santa Eugenia. RENFE stopped train traffic on the affected routes. The Madrid traffic control centre experienced trouble with the chaotic traffic and media talk about hundreds of victims. Madrid became the scene of the worst terrorist attack in the history of Spain. The Madrid hospitals activated their disaster plans. A request for blood donors was sent out and the citizens of Madrid responded en masse.

Those killed were brought to pavilion six at the exhibition centre IFEMA next to Madrid international airport. Doctors, psychologists and forensic personnel were standing by to take care of the families coming to identify their relatives. The number of fatalities reached 190. And there were 1,500 wounded.

There were only three days left to the national election and all the political parties immediately cancelled their campaigns. Thousands of people, all over Spain, demonstrated against the massacre. The King of the emergency services could be improved; and an improved ICS (Incident Command System) should be developed and implemented.

A modern communications system, allowing communication between the various emergency services (the police, fire service, emergency medical services) and other agencies and between different levels of command & control within these organisations is a critical factor at major incidents of this magnitude.

The risk of hazardous materials involved in a terrorist attack should also be considered, as it places specific demands on the training, equipment and capability of the emergency services' responders.

The King of Spain addressed the nation and spoke of cohesion, calm and dignity in the battle against terrorism. ETA was at first identified as being responsible for the massacre. But even as it became evident that Al Qaida was responsible for the massacre the Spanish government continued to accuse ETA.

On Saturday night 13th March, the day before the elections, there were nationwide demonstrations, and the government was accused of covering up information. On 14th March, a massive percentage of the electorate voted in the elections, whilst still saddened by the tragedy. In contrast to all earlier predictions, the sitting government led by President José Maria Aznar loses the election, and the Socialist Party led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero wins.

Spain's history of terrorism goes back many decades, and terrorism is integrated into civil protection plans. The success of the rescue and emergency work and follow-up work was a direct result of this.