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Members of the Sheriff's Special Enforcement Bureau (SWAT) surround a Metro Blue Line train and fire smoke grenades in a terrorism drill Friday held near the Compton Station.



PHOTOS BY KIM SIM

Sheriff's Department Leads Massive Terrorist Exercise

By BILL HEARD and KIM SIM

(Jan. 30, 2004) In what was billed as the "largest, functional terrorism exercise held in Los Angeles County," some 500 law enforcement, military and emergency personnel converged on the Metro Blue Line Friday.

In a rapidly moving scenario that began about 9 a.m., "terrorists" launched a chemical attack on some 100 "victims" at the Cerritos Performing Arts Center and then fled toward Compton.

The four "suspects" crashed their vehicle near the Compton station where they seized a northbound Metro Blue Line train.

The simulated attacks – called "Operation Blue Skies" – drew a massive response from local, state and federal authorities led by the Sheriff's Department, including members of the Transit Services Bureau.

At least a dozen agencies – including county, city and local fire departments, California National Guard, FBI, Metro Rail Operations and MTA Security – participated in the drill.

'Semblance of service'

"We still had to maintain a semblance of service for our regular customers" during the exercise, said Duane Martin, Rail Operations Control Center manager. Metro Blue Line trains were single-tracked through the exercise area.

"Operation Blue Skies" gave MTA its first opportunity to use the Rail Mobile Emergency Command Center, a newly converted facilities truck modified to serve both as a command center and as an emergency dispatch center.

Dimosthenis Giannissopoulos, chief of security for the Athens Metro system, was on hand to observe the exercise in preparation for the 2004 Olympic Games. Greek officials have said they expect an attack by anarchist groups at the games, scheduled Aug. 13 – 29, in Athens.

By studying procedures used during the exercise by law enforcement and emergency personnel, Giannissopoulos hopes to prevent an attack during the Summer Olympics.

"It can happen and it might happen," he said. "If it might happen, we have to be prepared. If we're prepared, we can save lives."

In full combat gear and carrying rifles, a SWAT team storms the train to capture the simulated "terrorists."



SWAT went into action

With the "terrorists" aboard the Metro Blue Line train, and hostages under their control, members of the Sheriff's Special Enforcement Bureau (SWAT) went into action.

In full combat gear and carrying rifles, they surrounded the train and fired smoke grenades. Hoping to talk with the "terrorists," and prevent injury to hostages, they sent a robot forward with a phone.

When that tactic failed, the officers stormed the train, capturing the "terrorists." Others, wearing orange biohazard suits, checked for the presence of toxic chemicals.

With the “terrorists” in custody, firefighters rescued the “victims,” including one man who had to be taken away on a stretcher. Two fire trucks with water spray jets were positioned nearby to decontaminate the “victims,” and several were directed to run through the spray.

Sheriff’s Lt. Mike Parker explained that the exercise included both criminal tactical operations and a decontamination phase.

He emphasized that the exercise was a worst-case scenario, but added, “It’s all part of the drill. We want to expose more agencies to what they would have to do in such a situation. We’re testing everyone.”

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