



Risk Mitigation Consulting Inc.

Intelligence and Analysis Division

OPEN SOURCE UPDATE

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INTENT

This open source periodical is designed to provide an overview of relevant, publicly available information on threat and hazard events and analysis of potential impacts to the interests of the United States, both at home and abroad. This product is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of all threat and hazard news and inclusion in this product does not constitute a confirmation of credibility nor precedence by RMC.



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Threats

Saudi Aviation Student Kills 3, Injures 8 in Shooting at NAS Pensacola – *Insider Threat*

Excerpt: A shooting at a Pensacola naval base that killed three people and injured eight others was carried out by a Saudi aviation student, authorities said.

He was identified by authorities as Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani, a 21-year-old second lieutenant in the Royal Saudi Air Force.

Escambia County Sheriff David Morgan said two of his deputies exchanged gunfire with the man just before 7 a.m. Friday [06 December] at a classroom at the base, resulting in Alshamrani's death. The two deputies were injured in the shooting but are expected to recover.

The incident is being investigated as an act of terrorism.

Analyst Comment: Naval Air Station (NAS) Pensacola is home to a tenant command which trains pilots/flight officers from allied nations to include Saudi Arabia. The perpetrator of the attack was a Saudi national who is believed to have embraced elements of a radical Islamic ideology as well as hatred toward the West, although an investigation is ongoing. Additionally, open source media reporting stated that the perpetrator had hosted a dinner party on the evening prior to the shooting at which he showed videos of other mass shooting events within the U.S. Alshamrani displayed a number of indicators that suggested that he may be a potential insider threat, although it is not clear whether any of these indicators were observed or reported by friends, colleagues, or instructors.

Separately, on 04 December, a sailor at Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard killed two civilian employees and wounded another using his service weapons (an M4 rifle and a 9mm pistol), before taking his own life. The motive for this shooting remains unknown although an investigation is ongoing.

Both of these insider threat incidents will likely result in policy changes to some degree. Some politicians have responded to the NAS Pensacola shooting with calls for enhanced vetting (or even bans) of foreign students training onboard U.S. military installations, while flight training for Saudi students has been temporarily suspended. The incident has also renewed calls by military personnel to allow the carrying of service weapons or personally owned concealed carry weapons for self-defense purposes. In the wake of the Pearl Harbor shooting, the shipyard's commander stated that personnel on armed guard duty would be reviewed for fitness for duty and emphasized the importance of evaluating and identifying personnel who may be potential risks.

Source: <https://www.pnj.com/story/news/2019/12/06/pensacola-shooting-saudi-arabia-student-naval-air-station-florida/4354994002/>



Jersey City Shooting Tied to Black Hebrew Israelite Group – *Terrorism*

Excerpt: The two suspects in a deadly shooting at a cemetery and kosher supermarket in Jersey City held anti-Semitic views and had expressed interest in the Black Hebrew Israelite group, New Jersey Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said at a press conference Thursday [12 December].

Two of the four people killed Tuesday [10 December] by the shooters were members of the Orthodox Jewish faith. Thousands mourned the two at funeral services Wednesday evening [11 December].

"Based on what we have collected so far ... we believe that the suspects held views that reflected hatred of the Jewish people, as well as a hatred of law enforcement," Grewal said.

Both shooters had expressed interest in the Black Hebrew Israelites – a group with factions that have been designated as "hate groups" – but appeared to have acted alone in what was being investigated as a domestic terrorism incident with a hate crime bent, Grewal said.

Analyst Comment: The shooting, which occurred on 10 December, was carried out by two assailants who were killed by responding police officers. The perpetrators were also suspects in a recent murder case, and one perpetrator had made posts on social media that were anti-police and anti-Semitic in nature. Additionally, the aforementioned perpetrator was linked to the Black Hebrew Israelite Movement.

Per the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), "there are many sects which refer to themselves with variations of the name Black Hebrew Israelites" and that "some, but not all, are outspoken anti-Semites and racists." Additionally, the ADL notes that "anti-Semitic Black Hebrew Israelites assert that white people are agents of Satan, Jews are liars and false worshipers of God, and blacks are the true 'chosen people' and are racially superior to other ethnicities." It should also be noted that Black Hebrew Israelites are distinct and separate from Ethiopian Jews and other Jews of color. Black Hebrew Israelites who express anti-Semitic views are typically classified as a hate group, however, as these perpetrators carried out a targeted act of violence based on religious hatred, the Jersey City shooting is best classified as an act of domestic terrorism.

Source: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/12/12/jersey-city-shooting-who-black-hebrew-israelites/4408073002/>

Chinese Diplomats Expelled for Breaching U.S. Military Base – *FIE*

Excerpt: The American government secretly expelled two Chinese Embassy officials this fall after they drove on to a sensitive military base in Virginia, according to people with knowledge of the episode. The expulsions appear to be the first of Chinese diplomats suspected of espionage in more than 30 years.



American officials believe at least one of the Chinese officials was an intelligence officer operating under diplomatic cover, said six people with knowledge of the expulsions. The group, which included the officials' wives, evaded military personnel pursuing them and stopped only after fire trucks blocked their path.

The episode in September, which neither Washington nor Beijing made public, has intensified concerns in the Trump administration that China is expanding its spying efforts in the United States as the two nations are increasingly locked in a global strategic and economic rivalry. American intelligence officials say China poses a greater espionage threat than any other country.

In recent months, Chinese officials with diplomatic passports have become bolder about showing up unannounced at research or government facilities, American officials said, with the infiltration of the military base only the most remarkable instance.

Analyst Comment: While details regarding the September incident in Virginia are limited, open source media reporting indicates that at least one of the Chinese officials involved was an intelligence officer operating under diplomatic cover. Diplomatic personnel are uniquely situated to conduct intelligence-related activities due to certain diplomatic protections that exist, as well as the privacy offered by diplomatic facilities and the high-level connections that diplomatic personnel interact with on a routine basis.

The incident reportedly occurred at a Norfolk, VA-area military installation hosting special operations forces, although the installation was not named. It is possible that the incursion was designed to test the security of the installation for future exploitation. Additionally, the New York Times' report states that Chinese officials with diplomatic passports have increasingly been showing up unannounced at research or government facilities, which could be indicative of a broader strategy for intelligence collection efforts.

Source: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/15/world/asia/us-china-spies.html?campaign_id=60&instance_id=0&segment_id=19626&user_id=08fbc2bcd133a3d190d20b9d83832608®i_id=60855337

City of New Orleans Suffers Ransomware Attack – *Cyber*

Excerpt: The City of New Orleans has suffered a cybersecurity attack serious enough for Mayor LaToya Cantrell to declare a state of emergency.

The attack started at 5 a.m. CST on Friday, 13 December, according to the City of New Orleans' emergency preparedness campaign, NOLA Ready, managed by the Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness. NOLA Ready tweeted that "suspicious activity was detected on the City's network," and as investigations progressed, "activity indicating a cybersecurity incident was detected around 11 a.m." As a precautionary measure, the NOLA tweet confirmed, the city's IT department gave the order for all employees to power down computers and disconnect from Wi-Fi. All city servers were also powered down, and employees told to unplug any of their devices.



Analyst Comment: Per the Department of Homeland Security, “ransomware is a type of malicious software, or malware, designed to deny access to a computer system or data until a ransom is paid. Ransomware typically spreads through phishing emails or by unknowingly visiting an infected website.” Local media reported that there was evidence of phishing attempts, although it is not yet clear whether phishing attempts were successful or if such attempts played a role in the successful introduction of ransomware into the city’s networks. Similar ransomware attacks have recently been observed in Louisiana (against the state’s Office of Motor Vehicles), as well as other major U.S. cities such as Baltimore and Atlanta.

The ransomware attack has had an impact in the city’s ability to provide routine services, with a number of local agencies reporting varying degrees of impact to their operations. For example, the New Orleans Police Department must record incidents manually and is unable to run background checks for the public. The local traffic and municipal courts were temporarily closed, while the city’s NOLA.gov website was temporarily offline. Still, critical services such as emergency services (911/police/fire/EMS), and sanitation remained largely unaffected.

Source: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/daveywinder/2019/12/14/new-orleans-declares-state-of-emergency-following-cyber-attack/#1e33dc546a05>

Hazards

Volcanic Eruption in New Zealand – *Meteorological Hazards*

Excerpt: An investigation into whether anyone was at fault for the deaths of at least 16 people in a volcanic eruption in New Zealand last week could take as long as a year, the county's prime minister Jacinda Ardern said on Monday [16 December].

A week after the eruption of Whakaari, also known as White Island, 14 people remain in burns units around New Zealand, 10 of them in critical condition, 13 more were airlifted to hospitals in Australia where one person has since died. The bodies of two people are still missing.

White Island's volcanic alert status is currently rated at two out of five, the same level of risk as the day it erupted.

Analyst Comment: The initial eruption blasted rocks and sulfurous debris into the sky, filling the air with acidic gas and covering the island with layers of ash. Some 47 people, including 24 Australian citizens and four permanent residents, were on the island when the volcano erupted. That has left the official death toll at 16, although authorities believe 18 people died. The volcano is New Zealand's most active and there was reportedly a recent rise in volcanic activity prior to the eruption.

The island is owned privately by a family from Auckland, who sold leases to four tourism operators. Tourism and legal analysts say that New Zealand's "no fault" accident compensation system had given rise to more risk-taking in the adventure tourism sector than was considered acceptable in other countries. Many of the tourists who were visiting White Island when it erupted were passengers on the cruise ship Ovation of the Seas, which was docked in the nearby Port of Tauranga. One of the passengers said those travelling on the vessel had not been told of the tragedy until late that night.

Scientists have warned that White Island, which is the exposed tip of a mostly undersea volcano, is highly volatile, and has been venting steam and mud regularly. Ash and other fallout from the eruption has made the sea near the island toxic. Troops retrieving remains from the island reported that they could feel the volcano rumbling underneath them. Where the streams would be present, they felt the water boiling underneath the soil.

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/16/new-zealand-volcano-investigation-could-take-a-year-says-ardern>

Past Decade May Be Hottest on Record – *Meteorological Hazards*

Excerpt: The past decade is almost certain to be the hottest on record, weather experts warned, painting a bleak picture of vanishing sea ice, devastating heatwaves and encroaching seas in a report launched at a climate summit in Spain.



An annual assessment of the Earth's climate by the Geneva-based World Meteorological Organization (WMO) underscored the stakes at two weeks of talks aimed at shoring up the 2015 Paris Agreement to avert catastrophic global warming.

"Heatwaves and floods which used to be 'once-in-a-century' events are becoming more regular occurrences," WMO Secretary-General Petteri Taalas said in a statement.

"Countries ranging from the Bahamas to Japan to Mozambique suffered the effect of devastating tropical cyclones. Wildfires swept through the Arctic and Australia," he said.

Analyst Comment: The years from 2015 to 2019 and from 2010 to 2019 “are, respectively, almost certain to be the warmest five-year period and decade on record,” according to the WMO. 2019 is on course to be the second- or third-warmest year on record.

On a day-to-day basis, the impacts of climate change are seen in extreme and abnormal weather. In the past year, rainfall in the central United States was the highest on record, while wildfires raged across the West. Major heatwaves hit Europe — extending into the Nordic countries — while the Southern Hemisphere was hit with 27 cyclones. Hurricane Dorian, one of the year's most intense cyclones, devastated the Bahamas and left an estimated 70,000 people homeless. Many of these incidents have been examined in previous RMC OSUs.

According to the report, the global average temperature in 2019 (January to October) was about 1.1 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial period. The ocean absorbs 90% of the heat trapped on Earth, leading to warmer ocean temperatures and melting ice, which contributes to rising sea levels. The rate of sea level rise has been increasing and, in fall 2019, the average global sea level reached its highest value since the start of satellite measurements in 1993. Arctic sea-ice neared record lows in September and October, and Antarctica also saw record low ice several times this year. The report also noted that surges in sea temperatures known as “marine heatwaves” had become more common. Sea water is also 26% more acidic than at the start of the industrial era.

While this provisional State of the Climate report provides an authoritative source of information for the UN climate change negotiations (CoP25), the final statement on the State of the Climate with complete 2019 data will be published in March 2020.

Source: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-climate-change-accord-report/earths-temperature-likely-marks-hottest-decade-on-record-report-idUKKBN1Y70SN>

Mercury Spills in Houston – *Accidental Events*

Excerpt: A 19-year-old man was arrested Monday after mercury was found spilled in Houston parking lots, leading dozens of people to be decontaminated as a precaution, authorities said.



The FBI's Houston office said Christopher Lee Melder had been charged with burglary and unlawful disposal of hazardous material. The FBI said he allegedly broke into a lab and stole the toxic metal. The FBI didn't release the lab's name or location.

Melder was also charged on an outstanding felony drug possession warrant. It wasn't immediately known whether he had a lawyer and authorities didn't immediately say if the spills were intentional.

Analyst Comment: On the morning of 15 December, a 911 reported a white substance on the ground in Houston. Authorities found less than a pint of mercury spilled in the parking lots outside three businesses located near one another: a Walmart, a Sonic Drive-In and a Shell gas station. Additional testing is currently underway inside the Walmart and at a nearby convenience store. The spills may have occurred earlier than reported as there was a report of an individual in Houston checking in to a hospital 3 days earlier, claiming to have been exposed to mercury.

The impact of exposure to mercury depends on how much mercury a person is exposed to, how long they're exposed, and their age. Small children are most vulnerable. Short-term exposure to metallic mercury vapors — such as from spills — can cause lung damage, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, increased blood pressure and heart rate, skin rashes, and eye irritation. Exposure to high levels can permanently damage the brain, kidneys and developing fetuses.

About 60 people were found to have trace amounts of mercury contamination near their feet and were decontaminated at the scene as a precaution, though the level of chemical detected was below what's dangerous to the average person. One woman was taken to a hospital as a precaution because she was pregnant, and 12 were evaluated at the scene and released. The overall threat to the general public was minimal due to the size and location of the spill. As it was outdoors and exposure was relatively brief, it is unlikely the vapors from the substance caused any significant illness.

Source: <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/fbi-19-year-arrested-charged-houston-mercury-spills-67772322>

White House Lockdown, Capitol Evacuation Potentially Caused by Flock of Birds on Radar – *Accidental Events*

Excerpt: A White House lock down was lifted shortly after a reported D.C. airspace violation Tuesday morning [26 November].

An evacuation was ordered for the United States Capitol, as well. That lasted about 30 minutes.

Apparently, though, it was a false alarm. Shortly before 2 p.m., NORAD confirmed that there was no airspace violation. The security scare may have been caused by a flock of birds appearing on radar, ABC7's Sam Sweeney reports.



Analyst Comment: The White House was placed on lockdown and the U.S. Capitol was ordered to be evacuated after an apparent unauthorized aircraft was detected in the restricted airspace over Washington, D.C. Additionally, fighter jets were reportedly scrambled from a nearby Air Force base in response to the potential threat. However, no aircraft (manned or unmanned) was ultimately identified, and lockdown/evacuation orders were lifted after a short time. While an investigation is ongoing, open source media reporting suggests that the incident could have been prompted by a flock of birds appearing on radar. While false alarms resulting in a security response are relatively common (such as bomb threats or false reports of an active shooter resulting in lockdowns), this incident is unique due to the massive security response involving major U.S. government facilities, as well as the apparent cause (normal wildlife activity).

Source: <https://wjla.com/news/local/white-house-reportedly-on-lockdown>
