



Risk Mitigation Consulting Inc.

Intelligence and Analysis Division

OPEN SOURCE UPDATE

April 2020

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.



Threats	Page
USNS Mercy Targeted by Attempted Train Ramming <i>Active Assailant</i>	2
Cybercriminals Exploit COVID-19 Pandemic <i>Cyber</i>	3
FBI Warns of “Zoom-Bombing” During COVID-19 Pandemic <i>Cyber</i>	4
5G Towers Linked to Conspiracy Theory, Burned in the UK <i>Property Crime</i>	5
El Salvador Gangs Enforce Coronavirus Lockdown with Violence <i>Gang Activity</i>	6
“Stay at Home” Orders Driving Protest Activity in the U.S. <i>Civil Disturbance</i>	6
Nearly 200 Inmates Rioted After Officials Announced Coronavirus Cases in a Washington Prison <i>Civil Disturbance</i>	7

Hazards	Page
Coronavirus Lockdowns Have Changed the Way the Earth Moves <i>Geological Hazards</i>	9
Severe Storms Across Southeastern U.S. <i>Meteorological Hazards</i>	9
Wildfires at Chernobyl <i>Meteorological Hazards</i>	10
Coronavirus May Affect More Navy Ships <i>Biological Hazards</i>	11



Threats

USNS Mercy Targeted by Attempted Train Ramming – Active Shooter/Active Assailant

Excerpt: A train engineer told police in Los Angeles that he intentionally crashed his locomotive at high speed near the USNS Mercy hospital ship in what seems to be a bizarre attempt to expose a perceived conspiracy.

Eduardo Moreno said he doesn't believe "the ship is what they say it's for," according to the U.S. Attorney's Office in Los Angeles.

The freight locomotive was traveling at a very high speed when it crashed through barriers, plowed under a highway overpass and skidded to a stop more than 250 yards from the Mercy. The ship was not harmed during the attempted attack, and no injuries were reported.

Analyst Comment: The freight train was operated by Pacific Harbor Line, which handles rail transportation and related services at the Port of Los Angeles. No injuries were reported. A small fuel leak was reported but was quickly controlled. Moreno now faces a federal charge of one count of train wrecking - a crime that carries a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison.

Moreno expressed conspiratorial views regarding the Mercy's "true purpose" to responding law enforcement personnel, alluding to a nefarious use rather than the vessel's stated humanitarian/medical support mission. This could potentially indicate mental issues or perhaps a political motive for the derailment. Still, limited information is available regarding Moreno's mental state and ideology, so the incident is best classified as an active assailant event at this time. Active assailant events are similar in nature to active shooter events, but rely on a non-firearm weapon such as an edged weapon or a vehicle (typically a car/truck).

The USNS Mercy arrived in L.A. on 27 March. The ship is a former oil tanker that has been converted into a full-service hospital. It contains 1,000 hospital beds intended to be used for non-coronavirus cases. The hope is that the hospital ship will take the load of regional medical centers expecting a surge of COVID-19 patients. The ship carries 800 active-duty doctors, nurses and other healthcare providers. However, between 8 April and 14 April, 7 crew members of the USNS Mercy tested positive for COVID-19 and have been isolated. This has not had an impact on the ship's ability to receive patients.

A second hospital ship, the USNS Comfort, has been in New York City harbor since late March, providing similar services.

Source: <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/02/825897966/train-engineer-says-he-crashed-in-attempt-to-attack-navy-hospital-ship-in-l-a>



Cybercriminals Exploit COVID-19 Pandemic – *Cyber*

Excerpt: Purporting to offer help and info on COVID-19, the apps can let hackers take control of devices to access files, contacts, the calendar, and more, according to Check Point Research. Mobile malware can be a threat at any time. But as cyber criminals exploit the coronavirus with phishing emails, ransomware, and other attacks, so too are they concocting phony coronavirus-themed apps to infect mobile devices. A new collection of Android apps analyzed by cyber threat intelligence provider Check Point Research purport to offer help and info on COVID-19 but instead deliver remote access trojans and other malware.

For its report "COVID-19 Goes Mobile: Coronavirus Malicious Applications Discovered" released Thursday, Check Point detailed its discovery of 16 different apps all masquerading as legitimate coronavirus apps. Installing these apps on an Android device unleashes malware that attempts to steal sensitive information or fraudulently generate money from premium services. The malware includes Mobile Remote Access Trojans (MRATs), Banker Trojans, and Premium Dialers.

None of the apps come from an official store such as Google Play. Instead, they're hosted on new coronavirus-themed domains, which Check Point researchers believe were created for the sole purpose of tricking unsuspecting users.

Analyst Comment: In March, Check Point Research found that more than 30,103 new coronavirus-related domains were registered, of which 0.4% (131) were malicious and 9% (2,777) were suspicious and under investigation. This means over 51,000 of coronavirus-related domains in total have been registered since January 2020.

Since mid-February, there has been an escalation in the number of coronavirus-related cyber-attacks. On 28 March, over 5,000 coronavirus-related cyber-attacks were reported by Check point. Eighty-four percent of the events were triggered by phishing websites. Approximately 2% of the events involved the victim accessing the malicious website using a mobile device.

A majority of reports show COVID-19 related malicious apps spamming contacts, conducting ad-fraud to drive revenue for the malware's operators, or attempting basic ransomware. There are recent reports, however, that show some applications are being created that attempt to take control of the device. This would enable the app's creators to access calls, SMS, calendar, files, contacts, microphone and the camera.

Microsoft reports that the overall number of cyber-attacks has not increased. Rather, preexisting ransomware, phishing, and other malware delivery tools are being repurposed to include keywords such as "coronavirus" or "COVID-19" to generate clicks.



Source: <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/malicious-coronavirus-themed-apps-target-android-devices/>

FBI Warns of “Zoom-Bombing” During COVID-19 Pandemic – *Cyber*

Excerpt: As large numbers of people turn to video-teleconferencing (VTC) platforms to stay connected in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, reports of VTC hijacking (also called “Zoom-bombing”) are emerging nationwide. The FBI has received multiple reports of conferences being disrupted by pornographic and/or hate images and threatening language.

Within the FBI Boston Division’s area of responsibility (AOR), which includes Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island, two schools in Massachusetts reported the following incidents:

- In late March 2020, a Massachusetts-based high school reported that while a teacher was conducting an online class using the teleconferencing software Zoom, an unidentified individual(s) dialed into the classroom. This individual yelled a profanity and then shouted the teacher’s home address in the middle of instruction.
- A second Massachusetts-based school reported a Zoom meeting being accessed by an unidentified individual. In this incident, the individual was visible on the video camera and displayed swastika tattoos.

Analyst Comment: The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many schools, workplaces, medical providers, and even faith-based institutions to communicate remotely, often with little time to plan. In some cases, personnel may be inexperienced with Zoom or other VTC technology, which can leave them vulnerable to online harassers. The internet has always provided ample opportunities for cyber-criminals and “trolls” to victimize other users. Identity theft, scams, “phishing,” threats, and harassment will never be entirely prevented, only mitigated. Many of the individuals that engage in this behavior are simply mischief-makers seeking attention or acting out a personal vendetta. However, some are driven by political extremism and use harassment as a tool to call attention to their cause.

All cybercrime should be reported to the FBI, particularly intimidation and threats of violence. However, it is often difficult to track and locate such individuals online, let alone arrest them. There is no justification for online bullying or cybercrime, but it falls to institutions and their individual users to follow basic protocols of cybersecurity. Pornographic or hateful images and threatening language may only be harassment for its own sake, or they can be part of a mounting campaign of intimidation or even a test of system vulnerabilities. In the worst case, they may be an alert by an attacker that the system has already been compromised. The “zoom-bombing” may just be a way to humiliate victims over a crime that has already been committed.

Institutions new to VTC communication should educate their users on the cybersecurity protocols outlined in the FBI’s warning. There are resources and training available online. Individuals and organizations can make the internet a safer and more welcoming place by reducing the opportunities for cyber-criminals and trolls to act out.



Source: <https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices/boston/news/press-releases/fbi-warns-of-teleconferencing-and-online-classroom-hijacking-during-covid-19-pandemic>

5G Towers Linked to Conspiracy Theory, Burned in the UK – *Property Crime*

Excerpt: 5G phone masts are being set alight in the UK, after online conspiracy theories have misleadingly linked the cell towers to the coronavirus pandemic. The BBC reports that at least three 5G towers were set alight within the last week, and police and fire services were called to extinguish the flames.

A Vodafone UK spokesperson confirmed to The Verge that four cell towers were targeted in the past 24 hours. Police have now launched investigations into how the 5G towers caught fire. At least one tower in Birmingham, operated by EE, doesn't even provide 5G services but was still set on fire.

Rumors and conspiracy theories over a link between the roll out of 5G and the spread of coronavirus have been spread primarily through social media networks. A variety of groups exist on Facebook and Nextdoor, where thousands of members repeat false and misleading claims that 5G is supposedly harmful.

One theory claims that the novel coronavirus originated in Wuhan because the Chinese city had recently been rolling out 5G. It's now supposedly spread to other cities that are also using 5G. These false conspiracy theories neglect to mention that a highly contagious virus would naturally spread more in densely populated cities with access to 5G, and that the coronavirus pandemic has hit counties like Iran and Japan where 5G isn't in use yet.

Analyst Comment: As seen in the earlier article regarding the train-ramming attempt on the USNS Mercy in Los Angeles, conspiracy theories can gain traction and motivate individuals to commit acts that endanger life, limb, and property. The conspiracy theories attributing the COVID-19 pandemic to the deployment of 5G cellular service are widespread on social media in the U.S., and it is possible that similar acts of vandalism could occur. There is currently no scientific information linking 5G cellular service to COVID-19 or any other health risks beyond longstanding concerns regarding cell phones emitting low levels of radiation.

Additionally, concerns and conspiracies involving 5G may be amplified by Russian disinformation efforts, according to a 2019 report by the New York Times. The report found that RT America (a Russian government-affiliated media outlet) was spreading propaganda related to 5G networks, despite Russian President Vladimir Putin's pursuit of 5G networks/technology within Russia. One Russian disinformation expert noted that the campaign sought to "get democratic governments tied up in fights over 5G's environmental and health hazards," which is in line with the objectives of other known/suspected Russian disinformation campaigns.



Source: <https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/4/21207927/5g-towers-burning-uk-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-link>

El Salvador Gangs Enforce Coronavirus Lockdown with Violence – *Gang Activity*

Excerpt: El Salvador recently celebrated a historic feat: For two days in a row last month, the country recorded not a single homicide.

In a nation that for years led the world in per-capita killings, the 48 hours without a murder came amid a sudden drop in violent crime. Homicides fell from 114 in February to 65 in March.

Driving the decline was not a gang truce or a new police strategy but a weeks-long national quarantine to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

The street gangs that have long terrorized El Salvador have now turned their attention from extortion and killing to a more pressing matter: enforcing social distancing restrictions, often with threats and baseball bats.

Analyst Comment: El Salvador’s gang problem is well-known, with criminal organizations such as Barrio 18 (18th Street) and Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) exerting their influence both there and abroad. The threat posed by both organizations has been cited in favor of more restrictive immigration to the United States. El Salvador’s suspension of services and quarantining of the general population began on 15 March. Since then, the country has experienced 125 cases, 6 deaths, and 21 recoveries.

A side effect of the stay-at-home orders has been a reduction in violent crime. However, the gangs have not offered their “services” out of a sense of civic duty. With no citizens on the streets, the market for their illicit narcotics is rapidly dwindling. With businesses shuttered, there are fewer establishments from which to extort money. In recent years, the Salvadoran government has shifted its focus from an “iron fist” approach to gang membership to a more rehabilitative one. While this effort has seen some success, the idea that the gangs are able to enforce quarantine suggests that they still wield a disproportionate amount of influence. Transnational criminal organizations are still businesses, and their persistence in protecting their markets during quarantine may allow them to make new inroads and further cement themselves in El Salvador, the United States, and beyond.

Source: <https://news.yahoo.com/killings-fall-el-salvador-gangs-213823565.html>

“Stay at Home” Orders Driving Protest Activity in the U.S. – *Civil Disturbance*

Excerpt: At least 15,000 cars and trucks are expected to descend on Michigan’s state capital on Wednesday [15 April 2020] to protest what they’re calling Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s tyrannical new guidelines to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus in the state.



The so-called “drive-by” demonstration – in order to maintain social distancing -- aims to bring traffic to a gridlock in Lansing and protest the “Stay Home, Stay Safe” executive order by Whitmer, a Democrat, mandating what businesses could stay home, what some businesses could sell and ordering people in her state against any gatherings – no matter the size or family ties.

“Quarantine is when you restrict movement of sick people. Tyranny is when you restrict the movement of healthy people,” Meshawn Maddock, an organizer of the protest with the Michigan Conservative Coalition, told Fox News. “Every person has learned a harsh lesson about social distancing. We don’t need a nanny state to tell people how to be careful.”

The protest – called “Operation Gridlock” – would be just one of a number of demonstrations of civil disobedience around the country by Americans upset with their state’s stay-at-home orders amid the pandemic. While the contagion has infected over 568,000 Americans and killed over 23,000, according to the latest estimates, protestors from North Carolina to Wyoming said they’ve been just as concerned with the economic and financial impact the coronavirus has inflicted on the country – echoing President Trump’s complaint that “the cure be worse than the problem.”

Analyst Comment: At the time of writing on 15 April 2020, protest activity in Lansing, Michigan is still ongoing, but included protestors on foot, not wearing protective masks, in contrast to the “drive-by” demonstration that would have adhered to social distancing guidelines. Similar protest activity has also occurred in North Carolina and other areas.

Protest activity related to civil liberties (such as freedom of assembly, freedom of movement, and second amendment-related issues) are likely to continue and may increase as restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic persists. Additionally, economic anxiety will likely drive protest activity as unemployment continues among large portions of the economy and various industries suffer.

All protest activity has the potential to become violent due to clashes with law enforcement personnel or counter-protestors. However, this type of protest activity could also potentially endanger public health, a sentiment echoed by Michigan’s governor after seeing the gatherings of protestors who did not adhere to social distancing guidelines.

Source: <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/coronavirus-stay-at-home-orders-protests-economy>

Nearly 200 Inmates Rioted After Officials Announced Coronavirus Cases in a Washington Prison – *Civil Disturbance*

Excerpt: Nearly 200 prisoners were involved in a conflict that broke out in Washington state’s Monroe Correctional Complex Wednesday night [08 April 2020], the Washington State Patrol said.



The revolt included inmates from multiple parts of the complex, including its minimum security facility where the state has said at least three inmates have been infected with coronavirus, Trooper Heather Axtman told CNN.

Earlier Wednesday, the Washington state Department of Corrections said six inmates in the facility had tested positive for the virus.

Inmates have been threatening to set fires and "take prison guards," Axtman added, although she said law enforcement is not sure whether the prisoners were following through on their threats.

Analyst Comment: Any population living in close quarters is at an increased risk for contracting COVID-19. The media has often focused on the residents of nursing homes and assisted living facilities, citizens living in apartment buildings, and military personnel. However, thousands of inmates have been restricted in some fashion after potential exposure, with thousands more confirmed cases of infection at the local, state, and federal level, including guards and other personnel.

Attorney General William Barr announced a plan for three of the hardest hit federal penitentiaries in Louisiana, Ohio, and Connecticut to remand vulnerable prisoners to home confinement in lieu of continued incarceration. Several states have already followed suit, with a focus on non-violent offenders, those 65 and older, those with existing medical conditions, and those who have completed less than half of their sentence (who will ultimately be forced to return to serve the remainder of their sentence).

Six inmates at the Federal Correctional Institution Oakdale in Louisiana filed a class action lawsuit against the Department of Justice (DoJ) with the assistance of the ACLU. They allege that the DoJ has been slow in its efforts to both contain the virus and send inmates to home release. From a public health perspective, inmates are just as able to transmit the virus to the unwitting as anyone else. The presence of the Coronavirus in the penal system places an overwhelming burden on personnel, not to mention the skyrocketing medical costs of treating so many new patients simultaneously. The riot in Washington state was not the only incident. The next night, 50 inmates at the Lansing Correctional Facility in Kansas staged a similar protest, breaking windows and setting fires after the Coronavirus infected 14 staff members and 12 inmates. As the virus spreads, the potential for civil disturbances inside the penal system will likely increase significantly. This, in turn, increases the potential for virus spread, both inside the facility and in the greater community, as guards that are required to be in close contact with rioters return to their families.

Source: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/09/us/washington-monroe-prison-riot/index.html>



Hazards

Coronavirus Lockdowns Have Changed the Way the Earth Moves – *Geological Hazards*

Excerpt: The coronavirus pandemic has brought chaos to lives and economies around the world. But efforts to curb the spread of the virus might mean that the planet itself is moving a little less. Researchers who study Earth’s movement are reporting a drop in seismic noise — the hum of vibrations in the planet’s crust — that could be the result of transport networks and other human activities being shut down. They say this could allow detectors to spot smaller earthquakes and boost efforts to monitor volcanic activity and other seismic events.

A noise reduction of this magnitude is usually only experienced briefly around Christmas, says Thomas Lecocq, a seismologist the Royal Observatory of Belgium in Brussels, where the drop has been observed.

Just as natural events such as earthquakes cause Earth’s crust to move, so do vibrations caused by moving vehicles and industrial machinery. And although the effects from individual sources might be small, together they produce background noise, which reduces seismologists’ ability to detect other signals occurring at the same frequency.

Analyst Comment: The reduction in human activity due to lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has a surprising temporary effect regarding seismic sensors. Due to reduced human activity, such sensors are better able to detect the “signal,” or seismic activity, due to reduced “noise” from human activities. While it is currently unclear what kind of discoveries/tracking will be facilitated by this development, and it remains unclear how long such lockdowns will last, the opportunity exists for enhanced sensing and analysis of seismic activity throughout the world.

Source: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-00965-x>

Severe Storms Across Southeastern U.S. – *Meteorological Hazards*

Excerpt: A series of tornadoes ripped through multiple states on Easter Sunday with severe storms expected throughout much of the southern US, according to reports, potentially causing destruction as the nation battles the global coronavirus pandemic.

In Texas, the National Weather Service confirmed at least one tornado nearly 50 miles east of Austin, as another more dangerous tornado moved towards the town of Monroe, Louisiana at 45 mph.

The weather service said the greatest risk for strong storms ran from northeast Louisiana and southeast Arkansas, across wide swathes of Mississippi and Alabama and into western Georgia.



Analyst Comment: The storms continued into Monday, 13 April. Social distancing rules, implemented due to the COVID-19 pandemic, were suspended in Alabama as communities utilized tornado shelters. The Mississippi Emergency Management Agency emphasized that people should have a safe place to go - and if that's a public shelter, to continue practicing social distancing. Meteorologists have warned that, as the storms move north, mid-Atlantic states could experience tornadoes, wind and hail.

Tornados, floods, high winds, and mudslides were reported throughout the south. The National Weather Service reported hundreds of trees down, including many that punctured roofs and downed power lines. From Texas to South Carolina, reports of at least 40 tornadoes spanned more than 1,200 miles. Radar data from the weather service suggests some tornadoes in Mississippi were on the ground for more than an hour and might have tracked at least 100 miles. More than 1 million homes were left with no power and more than 30 people have been reported dead across the Southeast.

Source: <https://www.msn.com/en-ph/news/world/tornadoes-rip-through-us-as-southern-states-face-severe-storms/ar-BB12wzJe>

Wildfires at Chernobyl – Meteorological Hazards

Excerpt: A huge fire that tore through forests around the defunct Chernobyl nuclear plant has been put out, Ukrainian officials said on Tuesday, after hundreds of emergency workers used planes and helicopters to douse the flames

Environmental activists said on Monday that the fire, near the site of the world's worst nuclear disaster in 1986 and believed to have been started deliberately, posed a radiation risk.

Officials said they registered short-term rises in Caesium-137 particles in the Kiev area to the south of the plant, but radiation levels were within normal limits overall and did not require additional protection measures. They did not say why the particle levels rose.

Analyst Comment: On 04 April, Ukrainian authorities said the blaze covered an area of 20 hectares. However, Greenpeace Russia cited satellite images showing it was around 12,000 hectares in size at that time. On 12 April, Greenpeace Russia reported the largest fire reached 34,400 hectares and that a second fire, stretching across 12,600 hectares, was just one kilometer away from the defunct plant. At one point, wildfires were within two kilometers (about 1.2 miles) of the Chernobyl radioactive waste storage facilities, prompting concerns from activists. Emergency responders successfully prevented the fire from reaching any Chernobyl facilities. However, while the initial large fire has been contained, new fires have also broken out in the area.

The 1000-square-mile area surrounding the nuclear plant, known as the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, has about 200 residents. Wildfires in this region are a frequent occurrence. The initial, major fire was started by arson. The fire was large and unpredictable, the largest since the nuclear explosion in 1986. One other regional fire was started by residential waste burning that lost control.



Throughout Russia and Ukraine, it is traditional for residents set fire to dry grass in the spring. The unique combination of wildfires occurring in an area that experienced a nuclear disaster creates a concerning and unpredictable situation. Complicating factors include the size of the fire, the strength of the wind, and the presence of rain.

Source: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-chernobyl-fire-idUSKCN21W0VZ>

Coronavirus May Affect More Navy Ships – *Biological Hazards*

Excerpt: Pentagon leaders anticipate that the coronavirus may strike more Navy ships at sea after an outbreak aboard an aircraft carrier in the Pacific infected more than 400 sailors, a top general said Thursday [09 April 2020].

Gen. John Hyten, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said one member of the crew of the USS Theodore Roosevelt was hospitalized Thursday in intensive care on Guam, where the carrier has been docked for more than a week. He said 416 crew members are now infected and that 1,164 test results are pending.

“It’s not a good idea to think that the Teddy Roosevelt is a one-of-a-kind issue,” Hyten told a Pentagon news conference. “We have too many ships at sea. ... To think that it will never happen again is not a good way to plan.”

Analyst Comment: It has become evident that any population housed in close quarters is at a significantly increased risk of catching COVID-19. This has affected citizens housed in nursing homes and assisted living facilities, college students in dormitories, inmates in the penal system, and military personnel. It is understood that COVID-19 carriers currently have the potential to affect 2.2 to 2.5 other people, which is greater than the seasonal flu. However, this number can be reduced via social distancing measures. As symptoms can remain dormant for part or all of the virus’s lifecycle, it can spread rapidly in crowded living situations. Naval personnel at sea are at an even greater risk, as they live and work in close quarters 24 hours a day.

As occurred with the USS Theodore Roosevelt, an outbreak can quickly incapacitate a crew and completely disrupt operations. Open source reporting stated that the crewmember hospitalized in Guam died on or around 13 April, while the number of positive tests aboard the ship has reached nearly 600 as of 15 April. An outbreak at sea can have serious impacts to military readiness, as the vessel may not be mission-capable, and emergency assistance may be difficult to obtain in the short-term. The Department of Defense’s (DoD) perceived slow response to the outbreak aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt and elsewhere has been criticized by servicemembers and the media as potentially allowing the virus to spread unabated. The DoD has been called upon to augment state and local emergency responders during the pandemic, thus further increasing the likelihood of personnel coming in contact with the infectious agent. Despite previous developments, it remains incumbent upon military and civilian leadership to be forward leaning in response to this and future disease outbreaks.

Source: <https://news.yahoo.com/general-says-coronavirus-likely-affect-144943890.html>

