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Security Below the Streets

Subway officials quiet on details

By Bobby Cuza
STAFF WRITER

When a doomsday cult unleashed lethal nerve gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995, Japanese officials sealed off coin-operated lockers, removed garbage cans and began to play warnings over subway loudspeakers.

When a bomb exploded on a Paris commuter train the following year, subway employees handed out 20,000 notices urging passengers to look out for suspicious packages. Every three minutes, a recorded message reminded them to be vigilant.

And riders of London's Underground long ago came to accept evacuation drills as a matter of routine.

In New York, however, subway officials have resisted such high-visibility measures in the wake of the World Trade Center terrorist attacks. Even amid the heightened tension of U.S. military strikes that began Sunday, the only obvious signs of underground security are a few added police officers.

Transit officials refuse to discuss security measures, stating only that there is "a heightened sense of awareness." Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik was also short on specifics when asked about subway security yesterday. He acknowledged an increased number of officers since Sept. 11 but added there are no immediate plans for additional steps.

"Security in general, all around the city right now, is at our highest state of alert," he said. "People should feel safer now probably than at any other time in the past because of increased security."

But transit experts said changes are inevitable and that authorities are not likely to publicize any new safety measures and risk tipping their hand to the terrorists.

Robert Paaswell, onetime director of the Chicago Transit Authority, said subway passengers may soon find themselves nervously eyeing every unattended backpack.

"There's a number of things that we're going to see that we probably won't like. One is, you're going to have to be more aware of people around you," said Paaswell, director of the City University Institute for Urban Systems at City College. "If a package is left alone, get away from it and tell the police."

Paaswell said he suspects police will deploy more plainclothes officers in the subways. In addition, officials could install more closed-circuit cameras and remove trash cans, which could double as bomb receptacles.

But the reality is that in such an open system, it's difficult to guard against an individual agent bent on destruction.

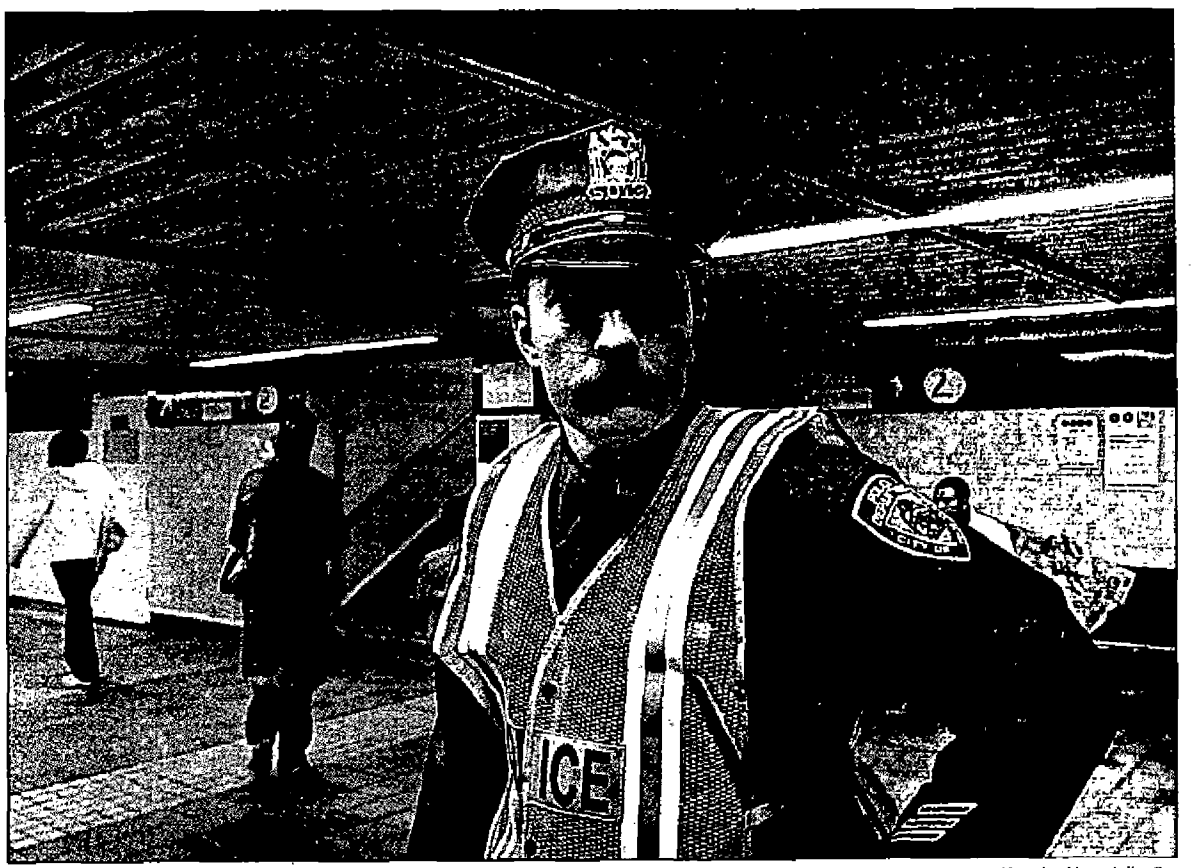
"You can't screen people going through the subway like you can at the airport. You can't put people through metal detectors one at a time," Paaswell said. "You'd never get people to work."

According a 1999 FBI report on mass transit and terrorism, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority undertook several measures in the aftermath of the Tokyo subway attack, including the removal of open spaces behind token booths — a natural hiding place for bombs — and the placement of antitampering devices in the ventilation system.

What's critical, Paaswell said, is the ability to minimize damage in the event that preventive measures fail. Communications systems must allow subway officials to close down stations and evacuate passengers quickly, he said.

"The most important thing in the subways, believe it or not, is the other passengers," said Michael O'Connor, former chief of the city's transit police. "It's going to be everybody's individual responsibility to be alert, and when you see something suspicious, let the cops know. . . . That's what's going to make all the difference."

Staff writer Melanie Lefkowitz contributed to this story.



Newsday Photo / Jiro Ose

City Police Officer Alex Funtow stands watch at the 34th Street subway station yesterday.

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