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Animal Rights Extremism: the threat to the aviation industry

*Saturday morning and a group of animal rights activists protest at a well known high street travel agent. The demonstration is noisy and at times unlawful as activists enter the shop, preventing normal business from taking place. Customers are verbally abused and staff have to call the police. Far from being an isolated incident, numerous demonstrations like this have taken place in the last twelve months and continue across the United Kingdom and beyond. **Superintendent Steve Pearl** reports on the way in which animal rights extremists are attempting to hold the aviation industry to ransom.*

What does an animal rights protest in a high street have to do with airline security? The answer is the Gateway to Hell campaign, or G2H as it has become known to both activists and enforcers. G2H is an animal rights campaign that targets the transportation of the animals that are used for licensed testing and experiments in UK laboratories. The campaign targets the airlines that fly animals into the UK and also any other company or organisation that is connected to the process. In the case of the travel agent, they sell holidays to a well-known destination that also provides primates to UK laboratories. It may seem tenuous, but to the activists it makes the travel agent staff and customers 'murderers' and 'scum', even though they have little idea why they are being subjected to this verbal abuse.

In the late 1990s the animal rights movement successfully targeted small breeders in the UK, forcing farms that supplied dogs, cats, rabbits and primates to close.

Although some animals are still bred in the UK, others are imported from overseas. The aim of G2H and also other campaigns is simply to choke off this supply so that the laboratories and universities cannot continue with their research and testing.

Travel agents are the most common target, but in recent years airlines, airports and other support companies have become the focus of these campaigns. In the last twelve months there have been over 100 recorded incidents in the UK, including

unlawful protests, criminal damage and malicious communication. As with all animal rights related crime there will be an element of under-reporting.

The extreme end of the animal rights movement is small. The individuals that lead the G2H campaign are the same people that are targeting Huntingdon Life Sciences, the largest contract research organisation in Europe, and the University of Oxford. Other local activists have contributed to the campaign by protesting at regional airports.

The animal rights movement is also concerned about live exports. After a ten year ban on the export of live veal calves from the UK to continental Europe, the trade resumed earlier this year. Although farmers are currently exporting through the seaport of Dover, airfreight has been used in the past and may be again. There were large-scale protests at airports in the 1990s, one of which led to the tragic death of an activist. If live exports of animals return to airports, security will be a key consideration for the industry.

Animal rights campaigns almost always use similar, escalating tactics. They begin with polite contact, requesting that a company ceases their involvement with animal research and testing. Lawful protest follows, often spontaneous and noisy, when activists repeat their demands to frontline staff. If the company stands firm, protest and communications become more threatening and abusive. It is during this phase of harassment and intimidation that companies often capitulate. Finally a company may experience more extreme tactics including criminal offences, damage and occasionally suspect packages delivered to home or business addresses. Pre-planned physical assaults are extremely rare, and not a tactic used against the UK aviation industry. All these tactics are designed to create a climate of fear and force the company to change its policy.

In view of these campaigns, much has changed in recent years. Police forces used to manage the crime associated with extreme campaigns as isolated incidents. Now we have recognised that these incidents are often part of larger, well-organised and orchestrated conspiracies against a company or university. The most successful

convictions of animal rights extremists have been conspiracy charges, and we will continue to deal with crime in this way.

In the UK our national policing structures have evolved and animal rights extremism is seen as part of a wider, single-issue, domestic extremism problem. Domestic extremism refers to the extreme single-issue campaigns that often sit alongside lawful protest activity. Animal rights is currently the most serious, but we have also seen unlawful actions associated with the anti-globalisation, anti-war and environmental movements. We are very clear about the difference between lawful protest and extreme campaigns. In addition to the work being done by police forces, we now have a regional and national response to domestic extremism. Specialist teams of police officers and support staff coordinate the work of forces, manage intelligence information and provide support to the targets of these campaigns.

Last year the British Government passed tough new laws to deal with harassment and disruption. New 'economic damage' measures in the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005 came into force, creating a new criminal offence of targeting any scientist, research facility or company in the supply chain with a campaign of unlawful acts including criminal damage, trespass, blackmail and libel. There is a penalty of up to five years in prison and people have already been arrested, charged and sent to prison under the Act.

We are also cooperating closely with overseas law enforcement agencies. This includes using existing organisations like Interpol, but also developing new working relationships, specific to single-issue, domestic extremism. Other countries are equally clear about their determination to defeat these extreme campaigns. In the United States the FBI describes animal rights extremism as the number one threat from domestic terrorism.

As well as the police, others are working against these extreme campaigns. Recently in the UK we have seen a grass-roots organisation called Pro-test stand up to animal rights extremists. Led by students from Oxford, and enjoying the support of scientists, politicians and members of the public, Pro-test has shown that people will not tolerate extremism of this nature. Scientists are more willing to speak out against

extremism and an online petition has over 20,000 signatures, including that of Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister.

There is much that a company can do when it becomes the focus of an extreme campaign. Good protective security goes a long way, but it is attention to detail that will protect a business from animal rights extremists. Personal details of key staff are often available from electoral information, online directories and lists of Company Directors. In many cases these can be removed or protected, something all companies that are involved with the movement of animals should consider. Remember, a sudden noisy demonstration that pops-up unexpectedly could be a sign that the campaign is going to move to the next level.

Another factor that benefits the aviation industry is existing security arrangements. The threat from international terrorism has led to sophisticated security measures at airports and supporting facilities. However this doesn't mean that the sector can be complacent. Often the vulnerabilities are at the home addresses of key staff or related targets such as the airline offices or customers and suppliers. The threat from animal rights extremism should be included in contingency plans and involve staff at every level of an organisation.

There are real signs that the combined efforts of enforcers, governments and other organisations are starting to make a difference. In the last twelve months there have been significant convictions of animal rights extremists both sides of the Atlantic, with others awaiting sentence. Many activists are on bail and other major investigations are ongoing. There has never been a better time for companies in the aviation industry to show resilience if they are targeted by animal rights extremists.

Superintendent Steve Pearl is head of the National Extremism Tactical Coordination Unit (NETCU). NETCU is part of the UK police response to domestic extremism, providing advice and guidance to industry and police forces. Visit www.netcu.org.uk for more information.

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