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Under the Volcano: Emergency Management and the Eyjafjallajokull Eruptions

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Title: Under the Volcano: Emergency Management and the Eyjafjallajokull Eruptions

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Abstract: Iceland's Eyjafjallajokull eruptions that began on April 14th, 2010 have exemplified challenges for transportation in a world of globalization, and ever-present need for preparation for emergencies.

The eruptions immediately became a worldwide story. There were attempts by governments, companies, and other formally responsible entities to manage this story. Some attempts were for the good of providing accurate information, satisfying the requests and needs of travelers and the general public, and reducing needless panic and distress. Other attempts were for the bad of hiding frank ignorance, protecting unprepared and poorly briefed decision makers, and advancing mercenary needs over those of the public welfare. All attempts proved quite difficult—almost like a quest for fool's gold—courtesy of the global, 24-hour news cycle. In fact, the best informed and most effective managers of the story seemed to be not those with formal authority over aviation and intermodal transportation, nor credentialed reporters covering their beat, but instead the proverbial men and women on the street—now a cyber-street—via cell phone chatter and photos, texting, Twitter, blogs and Internet chat rooms, Facebook, and going viral on YouTube and similar venues. These and ever newer social networking capabilities need to be better integrated into emergency planning and operations for all transportation decision makers. What hasn't changed is that the perceptions of travelers and the general public will largely influence behavior and other reactions for good or for ill. Managing the story of a transportation emergency is as important as any other emergency task—not just spinning the challenge but actually helping to meet it.

The eruptions in the context of an increasingly interdependent world immediately demonstrated how politics are ever more important in emergency response. It quickly became obvious that a question like who owns the skies was difficult, perhaps, impossible to answer to everyone's satisfaction. National sovereignty; professional, socio-cultural and personal turf battles; and electoral campaigns were exposed as an impediment to daily commercial aviation operations, planning for emergencies, and the implementation and evaluation of emergency plans. Much as political decisions carving up much of the Mideast and of Africa over the last 200 years continue to contribute to seemingly intractable problems of governance, war, poverty, and disease, politically carving up the skies continues to contribute to present and future accidents waiting to happen. More than ever, international and transnational organizations need to be in control driving optimal education, professionalization, standardization, and viable policies and programs.

The eruptions immediately demonstrated the importance of applied science and engineering needing to be shared on a worldwide basis. Having worked and lived through the 1991 Mount Pinatubo eruptions (concurrent with typhoon and earthquake phenomena) in the Republic of the Philippines, I find that volcanologists and seismologists still have more work to do in helping us predict the time, duration, intensity, and pattern of eruptions. Engineers have more work to do in helping us understand and predict the effects of silicates, glass fibers, and other products of an eruption on aircraft and aircraft engines. The same applies to the short-term through long-term health effects of coming in contact with volcanic debris and its sequelae. (We may be further along, however, than in identifying the health effects pertaining to inhalation of or body exposure to debris in instances such as the 1989-1990 Persian

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Gulf War, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and 9/11.) In addition, we must take special note of the need for more work in operations research and the mathematical underpinnings of aircraft, intermodal transport, passenger, cargo, and support logistics. Add to this the need for more adaptive quantitative approaches to modeling of revenue and cost projections including insurance risk. The more globalization fosters a global village, even one varying in the permeability of boundaries, the more applied mathematics can inform subjective human judgment.

In a world of globalization, just about any transportation event and the response to it have significant security implications. In essence, the world has become a research laboratory for all criminals including those practicing terrorism. A natural disaster, much as daily security violations, precipitates a response that can be easily studied by those who seek to harm the transportation system and those within it. Not only can the response to an event be studied to help predict and exploit a counter-criminal response, but the event itself and the response can serve as an ideal time for criminal behavior. One example is the terrorist tactic of causing one explosion and then another timed to hit first responders and those who gather to observe the scene. Another is the worldwide sharing of suicide terrorist tactics against transportation on land, sea, and in the air. The lesson learned is that not only are we living and working in a fishbowl, but we plan and respond in one. The increasingly sophisticated cybersecurity challenge further exacerbates the challenge to live, work, plan, and respond as if we are always being observed and analyzed for the next security attack.

I'd like to conclude by citing one of the greatest novels of the 20th century—*Under the Volcano* by Malcolm Lowry, published in 1947. A brief plot summary does no justice to the book, but it concerns the last day in the life of an ex-political functionary living in Quauhnahuac, Mexico who abuses mescal and is wrestling with the aftermath of a broken marriage. It's the annual Day of the Dead and, looking for death, he finds it, shot to death by the local police and thrown into a barranca (ravine) with a dead dog thrown after him. All this occurs under the twin volcanoes Popo and Izta. Like all of us he has problems. Like all of us he has successes and failures. Like all of us he has questioned the meaning of life and of his own life. And like all of us, his birth is a death sentence at least in the material world, while nature precedes and will succeed him. The point for us and the lessons learned from *Eyjafjallajökull* is that nature can never be completely mastered. But unlike Lowry's protagonist, we should not lose hope, but instead keep struggling with every precious moment of life we have in a timeless universe.

Note: The history of scientific psychology's support of emergency planning seems to have most often focused on selecting people for certain tasks, psychological warfare and propaganda, the minimization of collective psychological phenomena including panic and rumor, and the prevention and management of stress. (Representative references include Carmona, R. (2007). A key partner in the team: Psychology's role in emergency preparedness. *Psychological Services*, 4, 135-139; Danieli, Y., & Dingman, R.L. (Eds.). (2005). *On the ground after September 11: Mental health responses and practical knowledge*. NY: Haworth Press; Rosnow, R.L. (1991). Inside rumor: A personal journey. *American Psychologist*, 46, 484-496; Dallenbach, K. M. (1941). The work of the Emergency Committee in Psychology. *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 5, 210-216; Yerkes, R. M. (1918). Measuring the mental strength of army. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 4, 295-297.) This week's IBPP article seeks to highlight psychology's role in analyzing the macro-system of emergency response and developing recommendations about optimizing components of the system within the systems context. [Comments may be sent to bloomr@erau.edu]

Keywords: Emergency Management