

AKA TOPOFF V**NLE-09: A Major Test for the Obama Administration***By Dennis R. Schrader, Exercises*

The Obama Administration will lead its first National Level Exercise (NLE) in late July, 2009, culminating twenty months of effort to innovate and improve this important series of exercises.

Throughout 2008, the Bush Administration planned a transition Principal Level Exercise (PLE-09), scheduled for sometime in January 2009, that would orient the incoming administration to its immediate responsibilities in the field of homeland security and give it a head start on NLE-09.

The National Exercise Program (NEP) was formalized in 2007 and adopted the Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP), which covers catastrophic incidents of all types – natural disasters as well as those caused by terrorist attacks. Tier I NLE exercises, successor to the former TOPOFF (Top Officials) exercise series, will be carried out annually as opposed to the biennial schedule that began in 2000.

The NEP has received significant attention since 2006. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) published a baseline analysis of the NEP in November 2008. The October 2007 TOPOFF IV exercise provided several key design lessons for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) National Exercise Division. The Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (PKEMRA) created extensive requirements for the National Exercise Program and defined the national-preparedness role of the FEMA regions.

Testing New Ideas

NLE-09 (TOPOFF V) was originally designed to test some new concepts that came from the improvements mandated by and/or stemming from PKEMRA and the lessons learned. Following is a quick summary of some of the most important of those changes and improvements:

1. This is the first TOPOFF-scale exercise that will primarily address terrorism

prevention and protection, as opposed to incident response and recovery.

2. The NLE-09 design is the first regionally organized effort in the series. FEMA Region 6, for example, plays the lead role and has been assigned coordination responsibility for its five states: Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Texas
3. NLE-09 is expected to cost only about half as much as its immediate predecessor, TOPOFF IV. The principal NLE-09 focus will be on funneling the decision-making and intelligence processes through the nation's fusion centers. The exercise's design reduces cost by using functional-exercise play to drive decision making without expensive props and set construction. Additional savings are expected from use of the National Exercise Simulation Center (NESC, activated in late 2008) to serve as the Master Control Cell and the node at FEMA to broadcast the simulated Virtual News Network (VNN) newscast.
4. The linking of operational plans and exercises, another first, is a major step forward that the military has used for a long time to test readiness. In January 2009, the new National Planning System developed the first interagency Concept of Operations Plan (CONOP) for Terrorist Use of Explosives (TUE). The FEMA regions have been assigned the responsibility of developing regional plans for each CONOP.

Congressional Oversight, And Issues to Watch

Congressional oversight: (a) is expected to be similar to that carried out before, during, and after TOPOFF IV; (b) might follow up on the new ideas; and (c) probably will look for answers to a number of relevant questions, including the following:

1. Did the individual states involved, and FEMA Region VI itself, have appropriate influence in the final exercise design, and were the state fusion centers outside that region also fully engaged?

2. Was there timely and universal after-action reporting and feedback? (Previous TOPOFF exercises were not specifically designed to educate and improve the preparedness capabilities of *all* state and local governments around the country.)
3. How effectively did the NESC perform at this early stage of its development?
4. How effective was the coordination between FEMA and NORTHCOM (the Department of Defense's U.S. Northern Command)?
5. Were operational plans tested fully and completely?
6. Was the private sector also fully involved?

Just Over the Horizon

The new five-year NEP cycle, it is worth noting, will test the ability of the federal government to have more than one exercise design in process at any one time. NLE-2010 is tentatively planned, for example, to focus on the simulated explosion of a 10-kiloton nuclear device somewhere in FEMA Region 9; meanwhile, NLE-2011 will focus on the possibility of a New Madrid earthquake occurring somewhere in the middle of the country. (The reference here is to the series of earthquakes that devastated New Madrid, a small town in the Louisiana Territory – now Missouri – in late 1811 and early 1812. The shocks were felt over an area of about 50,000 square miles; by comparison, the shocks from the much more famous San Francisco earthquake of 1906 were felt over an area of approximately 6,000 square miles.)

The design of the operational plans for both of these exercises should already be underway, and it will be extraordinarily challenging for the exercise designers and planners to manage these efforts simultaneously.

For further information: An official summary of the National Level Exercise (NLE-09) program can be found at: http://www.fema.gov/media/fact_sheets/nle09.shtm.