

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson*****Agents of Opportunity: Responding to the Threat of Chemical Terrorism***

March 19, 2015 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Emergency Preparedness, Response and Communications subcommittee hearing entitled “Agents of Opportunity: Responding to the Threat of Chemical Terrorism”:

“By holding this hearing in the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications, the Committee is sending a strong message to the American public that chemical security is a shared responsibility. When a chemical incident occurs, our emergency responders are called to the site. Rarely do these brave men and women have the benefit of full information or know whether an incident is the result of terrorism or an accident.

One of the most notorious attacks on a mass transit system occurred nearly twenty years ago. On March 20, 1995, terrorists carried out a coordinated series of sarin gas attacks in the Tokyo subway system, killing 12 and sickening over 5,000. That day, emergency responders were notified within 15 minutes, police blocked access to the subway system within 1 hour, and authorities identified sarin as the chemical agent within three hours. But first responders and healthcare workers did not have appropriate personal protective equipment. No primary decontamination was conducted at the site. As a result, 135 firefighters and 23% of hospital staff at the hospital receiving the initial victims experienced secondary exposure.

In the wake of these attacks, we asked ourselves how we could make sure emergency responders had the equipment and response protocols in place to respond to a Tokyo-style event safely and contain the damage. Twenty years later, those same questions are being asked, although the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks certainly added a sense of urgency.

I look forward to hearing testimony on emergency preparedness and response capabilities to chemical incidents regardless of their origins, and learning more about the Baltimore Demonstration Project. I should note that today’s hearing is a continuation of this Committee’s efforts to address this threat.

Back in 2006, a series of deadly chlorine bomb attacks in Iraq intensified interest in bolstering chemical security here in the U.S. One aspect of addressing the chemical threat is determining how best to fortify chemical plants to ensure that they are not attacked and that stored chemicals are not stolen for terrorist purposes.

In response to a series of classified briefings and conversations with then-DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff, I co-authored legislation to, for the first time, require chemical facilities to conduct vulnerability assessments and have security plans in place to address their vulnerabilities. That program, known as the Chemical Facility Anti-Terrorism Standards program, or “CFATS,” includes a provision that encourages information sharing with State and local emergency responders.

Given the diverse ways that chemicals behave, it is critical that those who race to the site of a fire or explosion at a chemical plant, as occurred earlier this week in Milwaukee and two years ago in West, Texas, know what chemicals are stored at the facility so that they can take the necessary precautions. Ensuring that businesses are good neighbors who share chemical security responsibility is important.”

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