

J. David Goodman  
Pool report – Police Headquarters tabletop exercise  
Sept. 14, 2015

For hours on Monday morning, scores of law enforcement officials, police commanders and representatives from a wide array of agencies – 49 in all, including among others, the United States Secret Service, the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority and the Amtrak Police – sat in a room on the second floor of Police Headquarters in Lower Manhattan and imagined the worst.

By the time Mayor Bill de Blasio arrived, just after 11:30 a.m., to survey the tabletop exercise for the visit of Pope Francis and the United Nations General Assembly later this month, the following had taken place:

Two active shooters, one at a hospital, another at a train station.

A power outage.

A building collapse on Cliff Street.

Mayor de Blasio stood on the central raised platform, ringed by large screens some showing live traffic on the F.D.R. Drive and Brooklyn Bridge, flight patterns and, on one, the cascade of unlikely and terrifying imagined scenarios. Nearly all were listed as open and, with a red background, high priority.

The tabletop exercise, known as a Multi-Agency Coordination Center Exercise, began at 8 a.m. It is the second so far held at Police Headquarters in preparation for the visit of Pope Francis to New York, which begins on Sept. 24 and coincides with the United Nations General Assembly.

The scenario was prepared by the Department of Homeland Security. The Secret Service is the lead law enforcement agency during the visit of the pope, who travels first arrives in Washington on Sept. 22 before traveling to New York and then to Philadelphia on the 26<sup>th</sup>.

During a 15-minute window in which a reporter was permitted to observe, the mayor stood in a tight circle the police commissioner, William J. Bratton, the head of the New York office of the Secret Service, Robert J. Sica, the head of the New York office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Diego Rodriguez, and the Police Department's deputy commissioner for intelligence and counterterrorism, John J. Miller.

"The idea is we can see the stretching of our resources," Mr. Miller told the mayor, who nodded. "A lot of wheels turning at once."

Mr. Miller said that earlier in the day the room had paused in notable silence as, from the podium, an announcement was made that N.A.S.A. had reported an asteroid heading for New York City. "For two seconds," Mr. Miller said, everyone in the room contemplated how to respond before being told it was a joke – a bit of humor in an otherwise serious occasion.

The mayor smiled at the punch line.

"Have people ready for every occasion," Mr. de Blasio said. He listened as the law enforcement officials explained how events are triaged between agencies and how assistance is requested when resources run low.

"I'm going to interpret as a layman up here," Mr. de Blasio said. "PD is doing a lot." Lieutenant John Mahon stepped to the main microphone.

"Alright everyone, we're going to go with our next event," he announced.

Pens poised over notebooks on parallel tables. Rows of suits and business attire and serious faces. Two men in army uniform. Above each a laminated card with the agency of critical business interest they represented:

The New York City Fire Department, Sanitation Department and Transit Authority.

The New York City Office of the Chief Medical Examiner.

Nearly every major city Police Department command.

The United States Coast Guard; the Federal Bureau of Investigation; the Federal Communication Commission; the Federal Emergency Management Agency; Departments of Energy, State and Justice; Customs and Border Protection.

Con Edison.

Verizon.

The Vatican.

“We have an explosion” at a theater near Times Square, Lieutenant Mahon said. “It’s an I.E.D. explosion from a backpack. So we’ve got to get everyone involved. There’s no report of casualties yet.”

He added: “If you get anything, just bring it up to the desk.”

“If people need something, they literally come up here?” the mayor asked.

Three minutes later, another explosion, this time at a Broadway hotel. Two foreign dignitaries were listed as casualties in the scenario.

“Detail unaccounted for,” Lieutenant Mahon said, referring to the security for the dignitaries.

The mayor listened and watched the room. Nearby a Fire Department representative was asked if he had enough emergency medical service people to handle the mounting need. He said no, but that he had requested “mutual aid” from New Jersey.

“Basically, it’s information in, resources out,” said Captain Osvaldo A. Nunez of the Police Department’s Operations Division, speaking to the mayor.

For the purpose of Monday’s exercise, the pope was taken off the table, according to the Police Department; the resources necessary to protect him were set aside as each agency figured out how to cope with the other extreme events.