

## Introduction

The National Security Public Information Guidelines provide a framework for the Australian Government and State and Territory agencies responsible for public information and media activities relating to national security issues and incidents. They supplement the National Counter-Terrorism Plan (NCTP) and the National Counter-Terrorism Handbook. They apply to day-to-day national security activities in addition to providing an appropriate response in the event of a terrorist threat or incident.

All national security agencies have an ongoing role in ensuring that information and media liaison activities work to:

- improve the understanding of the public of Australia's national security organisations and systems;
- generate confidence in Australia's ability to respond to any terrorism threat or activity; and
- create public trust that governments and national security agencies are open and accountable, and will release all information possible within the confines of operational and security considerations.

## Core principles

- public safety is the highest priority;
- information flow should only be restricted in the interests of safety and/or operational security;
- public information and media responses/releases must undergo all necessary clearances;
- agencies must not make unapproved comment on another agency's area of responsibility; and
- all agencies have a responsibility to ensure adequate training and resources to respond to any situation/incident.

## The national security environment

Activities outlined in these guidelines are referenced against the levels of national counter-terrorism alert in the NCTP. Each State and Territory Government will determine its response to a terrorist incident based on an assessment of the risk. This could include activating a State/Territory Crisis Centre (S/TCC).

<b>Low</b>	Terrorist attack is not expected.
<b>Medium</b>	Terrorist attack could occur.
<b>High</b>	Terrorist attack is likely.
<b>Extreme</b>	Terrorist attack is imminent or has occurred.

## Public announcements on counter-terrorism alerts

The Australian Government will take appropriate steps to notify the community of changes to the level of national counter-terrorism alert. Such announcements will be issued at the discretion of the Prime Minister, Australian Government Attorney-General or other Australian Government Minister.

The Australian Government determines the level of the national counter-terrorism alert on the advice of the Australian Government Counter-Terrorism Committee, based on assessments of the threat environment by the National Threat Assessment Centre (NTAC) in ASIO. The alert level informs national preparation and planning; dictates levels of precaution and vigilance to minimise the risk; and should be used as the basis of public discussion of the risk to Australia.

The Protective Security Coordination Centre (PSCC) in the Australian Government Attorney-General's Department (AGD) will notify National Counter-Terrorism Committee (NCTC) members of any change in the alert level. The AGD Public Affairs Unit will follow up with NCTC agency media units.

The lead time in alerting agencies of a change in the alert level is likely to be extremely short, but it is important that all agencies act in a unified way to reinforce the nature of the alert. As soon as agreement has been reached and a public announcement prepared, AGD Public Affairs will distribute the public statement to all State/Territory police media liaison officers (MLOs), all State/Territory Premiers'/ Chief Ministers' Departments, all NCTC agency MLOs and New Zealand. AGD Public Affairs will also provide Australian Government-cleared supporting key facts to all NCTC agencies.

Issuing a public warning may not necessarily mean a change in the national counter-terrorism alert level.

Operational and policy responses to the incident or a heightened alert may include activation of the national counter-terrorism arrangements under the NCTP. This could include activation of the National Crisis Committee and State/Territory Crisis Centres.

## National Terrorist Situation

A terrorist incident may be declared a **National Terrorist Situation** by the Australian Government as outlined in the National Counter-Terrorism Plan. If a National Terrorist Situation is declared, overall responsibility for policy and broad strategy in relation to the incident transfers to the Australian Government, in close consultation with relevant States or Territories.

Particular care should be taken to ensure that public communication messages do not compromise operational issues. Coordination and consultation will be conducted through the Australian Government Attorney-General's Department (AGD) Public Affairs Unit and designated contacts in each State and Territory according to jurisdictional standing arrangements.

The Prime Minister or the Attorney-General will be the primary source of media comment from the Australian Government.

The Premier/Chief Minister or a designated spokesperson will perform this role for the States and Territories. Police will be responsible for public information and media liaison according to their standing arrangements, in consultation with other affected agencies or organisations.

Other spokespersons may be called upon to provide comment or reinforce key facts during a situation/incident. For example, the Australian Government Chief Medical Officer has a role in issuing public health warnings and statements in relation to threats to public health.

Every effort will be made to ensure that media releases and comments are coordinated between State, Territory and Australian Government Ministers and relevant agencies, prior to issue.

## Importance of media liaison and public information activities

1. In the event of a national security incident or a period of heightened national counter-terrorism alert it will be critical to:
  - provide appropriate advice for public safety;
  - ensure that the authorities provide accurate and timely information;
  - work with operational areas to ensure the satisfactory management of the threat period or resolution;
  - prevent an information vacuum which would encourage speculation and misinformation;
  - build and hold public confidence in the ability of authorities to prevent or resolve the incident; and
  - be conscious of the fact that national security public information and media activity is likely to be closely monitored by potential or actual terrorist operatives.

## Communication coordination

2. AGD Public Affairs will have overall responsibility for coordinating all Australian Government public information and media activity in relation to a heightened counter-terrorism level of alert or terrorist incident.
3. Coordination of public information in the States and Territories will be in accordance with their standing arrangements and may vary across jurisdictions.
4. AGD Public Affairs will also act as the coordination point between Australian Government agencies and the States and Territories. AGD MLOs may be co-located with the relevant State/Territory media unit as required.
5. AGD Public Affairs will advise all appropriate agencies of coordination arrangements and contact details.
6. If a terrorist incident/issue involves industry or non-government organisations, appropriate steps should be taken to consult and coordinate with all relevant stakeholders, according to Australian Government and State/Territory standing arrangements.

## Release and distribution of information

7. AGD Public Affairs will maintain up-to-date contact and distribution mechanisms to facilitate timely distribution of information.
8. It is crucial that Media Liaison Officers (MLOs) coordinate their activities to maintain a continual flow of information. This should include the provision or sharing of:
  - details of information released;
  - matters covered at briefings and press conferences;
  - draft media releases requiring clearance; and
  - media statements.

Where possible, early advice of major initiatives, either operational or policy, should be provided to other relevant agencies.

## Consequence management

9. All MLOs must continue to coordinate and distribute information after the initial incident/situation has been resolved.
10. A wide range of emergency management organisations and health-related agencies could be involved in the management of the consequences of a terrorist incident.
11. Issues relating to consequence management, such as assistance to any victims, notification of families, management of hospital and health-related issues should be clearly identified as separate from ongoing national security issues.
12. All jurisdictions should continue to upload public information to their websites and ensure that links are maintained to the National Security Website ([www.nationalsecurity.gov.au](http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au)) and those of other relevant consequence management agencies.