



Protective Clothing – Hostile Environments

Protective vests, ballistic vests, helmets and other clothing – Hostile Environments

With firearms, petrol bombs, plastic bullets, tear gas and a wide collection of other weapons or Riot Control Agents in the Hostile Environments we may have to visit, having the right protective equipment, advice, knowledge and training on using such items effectively is crucial.

All too often people are on the ground in a Hostile region with no real understanding of the risks and what it takes to mitigate them, or equally disturbing having been briefed or trained and issued equipment or clothing they cannot be bothered to use it due to complacency or inconvenience. Sadly when this happens and the worst case scenario eventuates, someone else is put at risk providing medical assistance or trying desperately to extract the person from danger.

Protective vests only protect you if you wear them! In an ambush, stopping the vehicle to get your vest from the trunk is not generally an option.

The key to protective gear is intelligence! Do you know the actual risks are in the places you are going to be in? Do you know and understand the likely weapons militia, criminals and even friendly forces may use at you or in a cross fire? What is your understanding of the likely perpetrators, attacks types, modus operandi, access to other weapons, safety and security in country, other safety security devices and protection you may have, etc.

There is little point wearing a knife proof vest if intelligence suggests snipers with 7.62 calibre weapons are likely. Equally a soft armour ballistic vest of level NIJ IIA may offer protection against a 9mm pistol, but offers little in the way of fragmentation protection from a roadside bomb. The range of protective gear is now tremendous, with varying tested guidelines and levels in varying countries. Also, in some regions like parts of Australia, possessing some protective gear without permissions or license may be illegal, so check and ensure compliance even in transit.

In the UK the Home Office HOSDB/CAST has a simple UK rating chart that rates from Knives (KR) and hand guns (HG) up to Rifles (RF). Internationally the American National Institute of Justice ratings are the most common ranging from (2) mainly hand gun calibres up to (3) Rifle calibres and (4) armour piercing. A much used NATO STANAG rating covers fragmentation standards.

The key issues when selecting your protective vest are the intelligence, risk, weight, protection provided, as well as price and other protection you may have such as armoured vehicles. The only effective way to choose your protective vests and other equipment is with specialist advice specific to you. There are many accredited suppliers and manufacturers that will provide excellent advice, so first understand accurately the risks, then seek advice, and then wear them! Vests can be soft armour or soft armour with pockets for hard armour plates, which can become heavy, but if that's the armour for your risk, don't remove the plates to stow away your mars bars and maps. You may laugh; we see it all too often. Finally on vests, getting the right size is important and never rely on a second hand one or someone else's.

Often the need to maintain a low profile as part of good security may be used by some as an excuse not to wear vests. However, even a heavy armour vest can be worn under a jacket or other clothing, so if the intelligence suggests you should wear one then do!

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Other key ballistic items such as helmets and safety glasses may be crucial and again this will depend upon your risk, so seek advice.

When it comes to Riot Control Agents (RCA) like CS or tear gas, you may wish to rely on a handkerchief and sunglasses, but you will not be alert to other risks with streaming eyes and consistent choking and vomiting. Whilst a face mask for paint fumes can be very effective short term or at distance, ideally if you are in a high risk region of such agents then an adequate, fitting respirator, (tested on you) and adequate filter is a must. Don't just go to your army surplus store and pick up an old S10 respirator, seek specialist advice from specialist suppliers. Even in areas with a low risk of such agents we travel with some protection in our escape packs. Normally a minimum of paint fume face masks, swimming or safety goggles, gloves and a jacket and trousers with cuffs that are elastic or have a tight Velcro seals, are required.

If you are at risk of an RCA attack, wear your protective clothing and keep your face mask/respirator with you. Always try to position yourself upwind and avoid wearing sun cream, hair gel/lacquer, makeup and contact lenses that increase the risks to your eyes. With the risk of RCA's, protests and crowd disturbances, is also a high risk of crushing, plastic bullets, petrol bombs and fires, so consider your escape routes with great care, consider other protective clothing, and wear natural fibres or if possible fire retardant clothing. Always keep water and eye drops with you too.

Remember CS/tear gas and similar can actually be very dangerous for some, or when a high exposure occurs, and in some cases has caused serious long term health issues and even death.

If contaminated, escape the area up wind as soon as possible, escape the region to a safe point and decontaminate yourself. Remove exposed clothing (which is normally all your clothing), slowly and carefully and place in plastic bags, flush your eyes with cold water for a good 6-7 minutes. Shower or hose yourself down thoroughly and carefully, flushing away from your eyes and other sensitive areas in cold (not warm water which opens pores) for at least 5 minutes. Try not to touch or rub yourself, instead just flush the contamination off your skin. If you have any itching or burning areas then baking soda diluted in water at a rate of up to 10% makes a good solution for neutralising the chemical contamination. It's worth preparing such a solution to carry with you and always having baking soda in your first aid kit. Then seek a medical examination if it is possible and safe to do so.

Finally all your equipment and kit exposed will also need flushing or cleaning. Surprisingly the chemicals can continue to irritate for long periods if allowed to lie around on any clothing or equipment.

Never underestimate the risks of protests, crowds and civil disturbances, their ability to escalate quickly and the affects of such chemical agents/Riot Control Agents.

For further advice on Hostile Environment Training for journalists, aid agencies and business travellers or advice on protective clothing and suppliers don't hesitate to contact us.