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Protecting the people?

I am not sure that I recognise the world anymore. It is much more dangerous than the one I grew up with. A world that is beset with natural disasters, famine, a European refugee crisis and terrorism. As countries look to secure their citizens' personal safety, more and more money is being spent on so called 'homeland security'. But what does that actually mean? Are we talking about our private lives coming under more scrutiny from eyes in the sky or being able to go about our day-to-day business safely?

Reliable, high-quality communications are the foundation of every defence and government department around the world. Satellite plays a major role in homeland security from monitoring of borders through to maintaining flood defences. Good satellite communications saves lives, and enables the rapid exchange of vital information during key national events, be they during times of war, disease or natural disaster.

Australia is a country that prides itself on keeping its citizens safe and uses satellite technology as a part of the homeland security mix. In addition to physical and digital threats from terrorists, satellite technology can also be used to tackle other vital concerns like food and water security. In South Australia, participants from 10 countries gathered in January/February 2016 for the Southern Hemisphere Space Studies Programme to develop remote sensing technologies to address food and water security challenges that could be rolled out worldwide. The programme is an intense course offered by the International Space University (ISU).

In the news recently has been the Zika virus which has established itself in parts of South America and is causing concern ahead of the Olympic games in Rio. In February, two cases of the virus were confirmed in New South Wales. The victims had recently travelled to the Caribbean but there is no real threat and the virus is not expected to spread throughout Australia. However, the incident highlighted some interesting ideas regarding the use of satellites to tackle disease. A mosquito's ability to survive and transmit viruses is highly-dependent on environmental conditions, which can be mapped via satellite. Although remote sensing is less accurate than in-situ measurements, it enables low-cost, long-term, convenient disease spread mapping.

So as you can see there is more to homeland security than just the eye in the sky. It is not solely about terrorism - it is about protecting people from a diverse range of threats including the pesky mosquito. ■

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