

Responding to terror attacks; the role of the citizen¹

Terror attacks in Kenya have evolved from a law enforcement concern to a matter of national security.

In less than a month the country has lost more than seventy people to the Al Shabaab. There is little consolation in the fact that the terrorist organization has suffered similar or greater casualties in the reprisals launched by the Kenya army. There is even less relief in the fact that our internal security is now under the command of new persons. Granted that Gen. Nkaisery is a trusted pair of hands with immense experience in security matters, the failures in our security system and the level of threat now facing the country require more than the reshuffling of chiefs to restore safety and protection for the people and their property.

We are living in a time of pervasive and widespread security lapses that need a complete system overhaul to restore operational aptness. The emerging form, brand and class of terrorist threat will not be averted by traditional methods of crime prevention. Efforts against asymmetric opponents, like terrorists, require investment in intelligence and community mobilization to obtain critical enemy information before an attack occurs. Terror planning is often secretive, but community organizing, aimed at coalescing anti terrorism support may generate and consolidate a base which may eventually breed a swell ground for reports and intelligence. There is no greater weapon against terrorism than good intelligence. Even when intelligence is not thought to be completely reliable it is suggested that security forces must act on it. Terrorism does

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not give you a second chance. For this reason you are obliged to treat every threat as a certainty until it passes on. This is the reason why Kenyans are perturbed when the NIS goes on record to say that intelligence on certain terror acts was obtained, passed on to the police but not acted upon.

In the fight against terrorism, every effort must be made to disrupt terror cells, independent actors and organized groups. In realistic terms, and however much we condemn the president's advise on taking charge of our own security, it is impossible to eliminate terrorism or for the government to guarantee seamless security. Even the most effective police, military force, counter terrorism and law enforcement efforts cannot guarantee perfect security against terrorists. The reality is that the terrorist threat is too large and varied. There is a good reason why we all take off our belts and shoes at the airports today. As citizens we are obliged to be aware of our environment and to take every-day, common sense measures to enhance individual and collective security.

Terrorists live in communities, interacting with us on a daily basis. A part from the cross border incursions, the Mombasa attackers, for example, live and relate with us. In the planning stages, there are opportunities for detection of unusual behavior. An odd domestic event, movement of people or assembly of machinery is sufficient to arouse suspicion. A community, alert to our present vulnerabilities, has capacity to detect danger far earlier than the police would ever do. Aspects of suspicious conduct are quickly noticeable amongst people living together. This type of grassroots defense is very important especially when dealing with a dispersed enemy keen on affecting soft targets. But this is as much as an individual can do.

With the growing terror threat, the anti terrorism unit should prepare a national system indicating probable areas, scope and level of threats. This will enable a mapping of security concentration and resource mobilization. It must be obvious to our security personnel that deployment ought to take a risk-based approach with the more peril prone areas receiving greater attention and support. With a matrix showing the range of probable areas of attack and timings, based on intelligence, the security personnel is able to advice the public on how to react or cope with the threats. This is why I disagree with the government advise on people living in the Northern frontier to stay put in spite of immediate danger to their lives.

Government terror advisory, even within state boundaries, is now a common practice in the more developed democracies. Unfortunately, our government has been reticent in making admissions that the country is under an un-paralleled threat and that citizens living in certain areas should exercise greater awareness and cooperate more with the police in attaining corporate security. It cannot be said that no innocent citizen knew of the impending Mandera killings and did nothing about it. Neither is it reasonable that large concentrations of people, like the quarry workers, did not deserve some specific security as a lesson after the first Mandera killings. How does the security team in Mandera expect people to play sitting ducks when there is no visible security for them? The Bali, Madrid, and the London bombings triggered special terror advisories in those countries. Quite often, the Israel government releases specific alerts to the military and law enforcement agencies, which then inform the public as to where and when to exercise extra vigilance. There is no reason why our government cannot do the same.