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45. PROPOSED MEASURES TO REDUCE HUMAN SUFFERING AFTER TERRORIST ATTACK: LESSONS FROM THE 1998 BOMB BLAST OF THE AMERICAN EMBASSY BUILDING IN NAIROBI, KENYA.

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ABSTRACT

The bomb blast, which rocked the US Embassy building in the center of Nairobi City, was executed by terrorists associated with Osama Bin Laden on 7th August 1998. Detailed account of what happened after the blast has been given by Mathenge et al, 1998. In this paper, lessons learnt after three years since the blast took place have been assessed. The review of the impacts of the blast provides good background for the assessment. Footprints of the blast since 1998 have been identified, thus setting stage for detailed assessment of the lessons learnt. Although the lessons call for urgent national action to counter future disasters, a number of constraints for such an action have been identified. In conclusion, the paper proposes recommendations for cost-effective way forward to ensure that Kenya is more prepared for any future disaster than it was in 1998.

1. INTRODUCTION

The bomb blast that devastated the American Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, on 7th August 1998 was one of the worst disasters ever experienced in Kenya. The local limited resources could not cope with the disaster, and as such, international assistance had to be sought.

In this paper, the lessons learnt may be traced along the following key issues: Impacts of the bomb blast, foot prints, as well as national constraints and their results. Despite the observed constraints, Kenya has a lot of potential to ameliorate some of the sufferings resulting from such a calamity. These have been depicted in the proposed way forward.

2. IMPACTS

The bomb blast did not only adversely affect the lives of Kenyans, but it also affected other nationals; assets such as buildings, vehicles and other equipment; jobs; psychology of people; and relations between Kenya and other countries.

2.1 Lives: According to Mathenge et al, (1998), a total of 257 people including 12

American nationals who were members of the American Embassy died on the spot and more than 5000 people were injured. It is believed that a number of those who were injured may have died, but the figures are not available for this paper.

2.2 Assets: A seven floor Ufundi House which was located a few meters from the American Embassy collapsed into rubble, trapping most of the dead people. The American Embassy, the Cooperative Building and many other buildings within a radius of 150 meters from the American Embassy suffered structural failure and almost all the windows were shattered and grilles and frames were twisted into mangles (Mathenge et al, 1998).

A lot of vehicles including buses and cars, which were nearby at the time of the bomb blast, were torn into pieces and others were tossed a number of meters from the roads they were traveling on. Such impacts on vehicles claimed a lot of lives. A lot of plants and

equipment installed in affected buildings, worth millions of Kenya Shillings were damaged beyond repair.

2.3 Jobs: Many jobs were lost as a result of the destruction of the infrastructure on which people relied for jobs and as a result the number of job seekers and the sense of helplessness increased significantly in Nairobi City. Consequently the situation adversely affected the lives of the dependants of the people who lost their jobs.

2.4 Relations: The bomb blast exacerbated the tense relations that exist between the American Government and the terrorist groupings. This was demonstrated by the missile destruction of a chemical plant in the Sudan by American authorities. Today some of the members of the terrorist group that carried out the blast are undergoing trial in the United States and others are still on the run. As a result the groups associated with Osama Bin Laden have vowed to retaliate; and for sometime, the American and Kenyan embassies abroad were put on full alert.

3. FOOT PRINTS

Three years since the bomb blast, the year 2001 continues to witness a number of footprints of the blast, which include among others:

3.1 People

Although those who are not related to the dead and the maimed may have forgotten the incident, the relatives have lived with anguish in their memories and hearts because the dead and the maimed might have been the only bread winners of the family; or their lost contribution to the family in many ways may have left a gap which may be difficult to seal.

The disabled people in hospitals or at homes may not enjoy their normal life any longer and their struggle for a living has been exacerbated. Those who take care of the disabled have forsaken more important economic activities and thus they do not suffer less. It is even worse for those whose relatives are in hospitals as the bills are raising to proportions, which may not be met at the family, level but will require external donations or borrowing.

3.2 Assets

Buildings that collapsed like Ufundi House, including the equipment in it, as well as the nearby vehicles were a total loss to the owners. Some owners who may have insured their property may have been compensated but those who had not may have been reduced to beggars.

Although the shells of the American Embassy building and the nearby buildings remained, the cost of pulling down the embassy building and rehabilitation of the neighboring buildings was colossal. It is obvious that although the buildings may be rehabilitated to some extent, their original strength may not be restored and any other future calamity may not spare them.

The site has already been converted into a memorial park, where relatives of those who died lay wreaths, on the 7th of August every year, in memory of those who lost their lives in the bomb attack.

4. LESSONS

A lot of lessons were and continue to be learnt after the US Embassy bomb blast in 1998. Some of the main lessons include, but not limited to the following:

4.1 Preparedness:

It is noted that terrorist attacks may be very difficult to detect, considering that the American Embassy building was then one of the well equipped with modern detectors, yet the bomb could not be detected in time. This is an indication that other installation could be more vulnerable in terms of detecting impending disaster. Good examples include the Kyanguli Secondary School where fire caused death of 67 students (Daily Nation, April 4, 2001); the Kenya Oil Refinery fire of early March 2001; Gikomba Market and Freemark Market fire in late 2000 and early 2001. In the latter installations, no loss of life was reported but property worth millions of Kenya shillings was lost.

4.2 Rescue:

Massive destruction such as the one that took place after the bomb blast proved to Kenyans that the national capacity was too limited to cope with the phenomenon effectively; and thus international support was needed such as specialized and experienced personnel, equipment, coordination, supplies and transport.

4.3 Recipient Institutions:

The hospitals where specialized treatment for victims of the bomb blast could be offered and mortuaries had limited capacity and makeshift arrangements were required. Doctors and paramedical staff were also limited despite the effort of recalling many from leave. The staff had to work over long hours under difficult conditions. The supplies were too limited for the demand and the international community had to intervene (Mathenge, et al, 1998).

4.4 Other Post-Rescue Activities:

Many other activities took place after patients were put in hospitals and dead bodies were placed in mortuaries. These included, among others: -

- A disaster committee was set up to coordinate all the post-rescue activities.
 - Counseling of patients and families that had lost their beloved ones was carried. Some of the exercises lasted for a short time while some took many months, depending on the case at hand.
 - Assistance to families who had either patient in hospital or lost their beloved ones was offered in terms of waiver of hospital bills or funeral costs.
- Two years later the bomb blast site was change into a memorial park where the families of those who died could hold memorial meetings for their loved ones.

5. CONSTRAINTS

The foregoing events were and remain too painful to Kenyans to be forgotten so soon, and no Kenyan would like to be exposed to such events. Every Kenyan would therefore, like to see a situation whereby we have clear national policy on disaster and established mechanisms for preparedness and tools to counter such events if they ever happen.

However, it has not been easy for Kenya to develop such preparedness mechanisms due to a number of constraints, which include, among others:

5.1 National Economy:

The Kenya national economic status has been relatively poor since 1997, partly because of poor response of foreign donors to Kenya support for socio-economic development. This has resulted in a reduction of national expenditure with provision for only essential services and goods.

5.2 Poverty Reduction:

The level of poverty has increased for the past decade and it is the national policy to counter the trend by trying to allocate sufficient funds for poverty reduction. The pre-occupation in poverty reduction has left little room for such national concerns as disaster preparedness.

5.3 El Nino and Droughts:

The El Nino of 1997-1998 and the subsequent drought of 1999-2000 brought about damage of infrastructure and loss of crop resulting in famine in most parts of Kenya. The famine resulted in heavy national investment on food imports and supply. This situation significantly affected the general national allocation of resources to disaster preparedness and as a result the country lacks the capacity to address major disasters at the moment.

5.4 HIV/ AIDS:

The impact of HIV/AIDS on the social-economic development cannot be over emphasized. Employers are losing workers in the, the latter being in their most productive years. At the home front, parents are dying young, leaving behind dependent children. The Government is therefore allocating the part of the scarce resources to control and prevention of the pandemic.

Despite the aforesaid constraints it is worth noting that Kenya has learnt a lot about the bomb blast, which must have enhanced the country's efforts to support the Disaster Management Committee. The Committee is currently developing strategies for the formulation of the national disaster management policy. When the policy is in place it will set the stage for more focused mechanisms for addressing disasters in Kenya.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

It will be appreciated that disasters do not wait until a nation is able to address them before they strike. After a disaster like the bomb blast strikes, there is urgent need for concerted effort for preparedness otherwise the subsequent disaster will have a more adverse effect as the nation is caught up in a more vulnerable position from the earlier disaster.

The country needs all the resources including funds and trained manpower to embark on preparedness. In this regard, the following recommendations are proposed for Kenya, as they do not call for heavy capital outlay, yet when implemented, they can place the country in a better preparedness position than before.

- Maintenance of under utilized equipment and space in hospitals, mortuaries, armed forces and charitable organizations.
- Awareness creation for personnel in large vulnerable facilities such as chemical plants, airports and water treatment plants. The awareness should involve drills and regular mock evacuation.
- Training for personnel in large facilities including alertness, handling of safety equipment such as alarms and extinguishers, use of escape routes and efficient rescue in the event of an emergency. Armed forces should be targeted for such training.

- Establishment and implementation of construction codes which provide for efficient escape routes and warning gadgets for imminent disasters.
- Cooperation between the local and international agencies who can supply goods, services and personnel should be nurtured through regular consultations and assessment of available capacities.
- The Government of Kenya should be fully supported by everyone in its efforts to sustain the Disaster Management Committee and to make the necessary budget allocation for national disaster management.

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