



Al-Shabaab returns to Nairobi

The terrorist attack on the DucitD2 Hotel in Nairobi brought vivid memories to mind of the assault by Al-Shabaab, on Westgate Mall, in 2013. The similarities were many: a handful of attackers, somewhat amateurish in approach, but determined in resolve, arrive by car with grenades and guns at the ready, then proceed to march through the front door, shooting indiscriminately ... and without remorse!

Caught in Westgate five years ago, I still have that unforgettable sound of guns and grenades in my brain, when attackers stormed past the supermarket cashiers, as I approached to pay for goods. A minute earlier and I would not be writing these lines. I also recall racing past a meat counter towards the rear of the store and safety, then later that day being shown a photograph of a pile of dead bodies, drenched in blood, in front of the same counter. Luck of the draw? Fortunate for me, but tragically unlucky for those who died – an official estimate put the number at 72 - for no valid reason.

The Ducit assault, once again, leaves me with a feeling of being lucky, at the expense of others, for in the time after Westgate, my work took me to *14 Riverside Drive* (the target zone) on many occasions, with meetings in an office building opposite DucitD2, coffee on the terrace of the hotel itself, where the gunmen created mayhem, and lunch in *The*

Secret Garden restaurant, where a suicide bomber pulled the trigger on his vest. The *14 Riverside* complex is something of an oasis in Nairobi and would not look out-of-place in Paris or London, its perceived serenity destroyed forever by the brutality of this deadly strike from the Somali version of Isis.

But rather than dwell on personal memories, the more important question is why was this mirror-image attack by Al-Shabaab - killing 21 people and injuring 28 - allowed to happen, alongside and preceded by other deadly breaches of Kenyan society, over the past 20 years? Particularly notable and tragic in this regard was Al Shabaab's attack on the Garissa University College, with the deaths of 148 staff and students, in 2015.

Nowadays there is blanket, low-level security, across urban Kenya – malls, office buildings, hospitals, hotels, etc., all have some form of personal and vehicle checks – yet while this might help to stop low-level crime, it is incapable of preventing any serious threat from terrorists. A few places have been kitted out to stop a Ducit-style attack: Westgate is now Al-Shabaab-proof (after the event) and Ducit probably soon will be. But that is akin to closing the gate after the horse has bolted: terrorists seldom return to the same place; surprise is their most potent weapon. A few other establishments, such as high-profile hotels, where visiting dignitaries such as Pope Francis or Ban Ki-moon are apt to stay, have installed barriers to make their ramparts terrorist proof. But then the questions become: *“Do we really want to live in a community where the shops and hotels resemble high security jails? Doesn't that in some ways mean our evil-minded adversaries have won the day?”*

Visitors coming from Europe are amazed at the prevalence of security in Kenya. I can't remember being metal detector screened when I entered my local Sainsburys or Waitrose in Clapham, but that would be the case in Kenya. The simple fact that you need an omnipresent security is a clear indicator that the more covert systems in place, to prevent and control crime, are not as good as they should be. A metaphor for this would be the highways in Kenya, which are riddled with speed bumps, the main method of controlling errant drivers, simply because the traffic police are, to a large extent,

corrupt and ineffective. Could you imagine the outcry if there were speed bumps on Britain's main arterial roads, such as the M4, or the A303, because the UK's policing and surveillance systems were unable, or unwilling, to control speeding drivers?

The overriding and long-term problem that terrorism has created for Kenya, stretches back more than twenty years to the Al-Qaeda *bomb blast* at the American Embassy, in 1998; with that event and subsequent *hits* becoming a force to destabilize tourism, one of the country's main income earners, on a regular basis. It is as if the terrorists are monitoring this effect (and most probably they are!) because just when it seems things are returning to normal, with European charter flights increasing in number and tourism on the up, there comes another devastating attack. This is often followed by those dreaded *travel advisories* coming from the UK, USA and others, that cause a knock-on effect, which brings about a rapid drop-off in tourist numbers for the next two or three seasons. To many people in Kenya, this seems unfair and unjustified. Shouldn't there be an advisory for travellers against visiting Paris or Brussels, for similar reasons?

The underlying logic for indiscriminate travel advice that warns people against travel to Kenya - while declining to announce the same edicts for Belgium or France - is directly connected to wall-to-wall security and never-ending speed bumps. Countries in the EU have developed largely incorruptible networks of concealed security, which are able to deal with most situations efficiently and effectively. In contrast - and though backed by intelligence and training from the USA and others - Kenya, though much better than it was (as can be seen from the professional way security forces dealt with the assault at DUCITD2, compared to the shambles at Westgate, five years before) is still in the process of perfecting effective security networks that cannot be impregnated or corrupted.

The bottom line is trust. Do we trust authorities to protect our interests in the most efficient and transparent manner? If not, then we have a pending problem, awaiting resolution. And until that changes, those much-feared *Travel Advisories* will continue.

Duncan Gregory (10.01.2018)