

Terrorism: Learning from the past and looking at the present

Marlene A. Young, Ph.D., J.D.
President, International Organization for Victim Assistance

Definition

A 1988 study by the United States Army found that over 100 definitions of the word “terrorism” have been used. While most terrorist acts are associated with political goals and effectiveness, the lack of economic resources may also be a motivating factor and individual or groups may be pursue a desire for social solidarity with others in their situation. Perpetrators may be individuals, terrorist groups and nation states.

Terrorism is an ancient device used to frighten whole populations and excite panic and a sense of emergency. Its modern use is traced to the French revolution and the “Reign of Terror” imposed by the revolutionaries.

The UN Security Council, in 2004, defined terrorism as any act “intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act.”

Terrorist acts are acts of violence or threats of violence against persons, property, organizations, institutions or symbols. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria has been considered an act of terrorism that precipitated World War I. Genocide is associated with terrorism by its effect on both individuals and general populations.

It is a subjective term since the same types of acts that are considered terrorist may be considered a positive force if one sympathizes with the perpetrator rather than the victim. Since terrorism is a pejorative term, most perpetrators use alternative designations such as freedom fighters, insurgents or guerillas.

Contemporary Terrorist Events

Matsumoto Incident (June 28, 1994), Subway Sarin Incident, Matsumoto & Tokyo, Japan (March 20, 2005)

The attacks were perpetrated by a cult named Aum Shirikyo. Matsumoto was where all three judges lived who sat on a panel hearing a lawsuit over a real-estate dispute in which Aum Shinrikyo was the defendant. Cult lawyers had advised the sect’s leadership that the decision was likely to go against them. Unwilling to accept a costly reversal, Aum responded by sending a team to Matsumoto to guarantee that the judges did not hand down an adverse judgment. A light breeze pushed the cloud of sarin gas towards the residences of the judges. The deadly agent affected the inhabitants of many of the buildings in the area. Windows and doors had been left open due to the warm weather. Within a short time, seven people were dead, and five hundred others were transported to local hospitals, where approximately 200 would require at least one night's hospitalization. These events are examined together since they were perpetrated by the same group and the effects on victims were similar. In five coordinated attacks, the perpetrators released sarin on several lines of the Tokyo Metro and also directed it against trains passing through to areas that are home to the Japanese government. In the first “incident,” 8 died and 200 people were injured. In the second, 12 died, 50 were critically injured and 5,000 “suffered damage to their health”.

Subway Bombings or 7/7 Bombings, London, England (July 7, 2007)

The term “subway” bombings is misleading since 3 of the four bombings took place in the underground system and one was on a bus. The bombings killed 57 people (one American) and injured 700. Three of the bombs went off at 8:50 a.m. and the final one exploded 57 minutes later. It seemed as though the attackers were targeting morning rush hour traffic. They were carried out by British Muslims and motivated by Islamic extremism and meant to bring attention to Britain's involvement in the Iraq Wars

Mumbai, India (November 26-9, 2008)

60 men entered Mumbai in small inflatable boats in the night on November 26th. They carried bags filled with weapons and ammunition, and spread out to nine locations to begin their attacks. Lobbing grenades and firing their weapons, they entered hotels, a railway station and several other buildings, killing scores and wounding even more. The final tally of casualties was 172 dead (four Americans) and 335 injured. Pakistanis were implicated in the attack. There was only one terrorist who survived.

Responses to the Events

Japan

Sarin poisoning was not well-known at the time., and at the time of these attacks, there were few victim support services in Japan. With the exception of a few mental health professionals, there were few resources to provide aid to victims and survivors. There were also cultural obstacles to pursuing any help other than physical medical interventions.

Matsumato

The Matsumato Incident was the first of its kind in Japan, and it was quickly superseded in national significance by the Tokyo Incident the next year. There was lack of coordination among responders and difficulty identifying the cause of the event. In retrospect, victims and surviving families expressed shock and disbelief at the numbers of those affected. Many reported long-term problems with their vision and fears of another attack. They said they were helpless to prevent such an insidious invasion since the agent of the attack was “in the air”.

Tokyo

Witnesses have said that subway entrances resembled battlefields. In many cases, the injured simply lay on the ground, many unable to breathe. Several of those affected by sarin went to work in spite of their symptoms, most of them not realizing that they had been exposed to the poison. Most of the victims sought medical treatment as the symptoms worsened and as they learned of the actual circumstances of the attacks via news broadcasts.

Several of those affected were exposed to sarin only by helping those who had been directly exposed. Among these were passengers on other trains, subway workers and health care workers.

Terrorism: Learning from the past and looking at the present

Recent surveys of the victims (in 1998 and 2001) show that many are still suffering from PTSD. In one survey, twenty percent of 837 respondents complained that they feel insecure whenever riding a train, while ten percent answered that they try to avoid any nerve-attack related news. Over sixty percent reported chronic eyestrain and said their vision has worsened.

Police, fire and ambulance services were criticized for their handling of the attack and the injured. The media (some of whose staff, though present at subway entrances and filming the injured, hesitated when asked to transport victims to the hospital). They were reported as being insensitive and intrusive. The Subway Authority failed to halt several of the trains despite reports of passenger injury. Health services including hospitals and health staff were criticized; one hospital refused to admit a victim for almost an hour, and many hospitals turned victims away.

London

The United Kingdom has an extensive victim support network and most programs have staff and volunteers prepared to provide crisis intervention and response to emotional and psychological needs of victims and survivors of crime. These personnel were involved in providing immediate services to families of those who died and were injured. They also assisted police with death notification.

As it happens, the London police had been planning a training exercise based on a multi-location terrorist bombing attack. So, they were prepared with plans and strategies for immediate response. Most thought the immediate reaction of responders was well done by police.

Victims said that felt like they were in a war zone with the bodies of the dead lying around and the twisted metal of the trains. Videos of the station, before and after the bombing left survivors, with a feeling of devastation. One woman commented that when she watched one of the videos she noticed a clock in the station and she watched the clock click down to the explosion. She thought, "now Jenny has one hour to live, now 30 minutes..."

Long-term effects included avoiding the use of the subway (difficult to do in London, nightmares, fear of being in enclosed areas and public places, and suspicion of individuals who looked like the attackers. Descriptions and photographs appeared on the BBC.

There has also been frustration in the aftermath of the attack. The police have put on a full scale investigation that resulted in three men being charged with conspiracy. But, in the final trial, they were acquitted on that charge. Two were convicted of conspiring to attend a militant training camp in Pakistan.

Graham Foulkes, whose 22-year-old son David was killed in the Edgware Road Tube explosion, has called for a public inquiry into the bombings. He said: "For almost four years we have been asking for an inquiry into what led up to 7/7.

"We are not looking for people to blame, but we also know that we have not been told the whole truth. We believe that crucial lessons need to be learned. If mistakes have been made, they should be put right, not covered up. This is not a witch-hunt, it is simply about saving lives."

An inquiry would allow victims and survivors to ask questions about how and why the bombing took place

Mumbai

“I saw the men walking up to the railway platform shooting indiscriminately, and people falling like ninepins. They were so calm, composed and brazen. They seemed to have the confidence of those who knew no fear and knew there would be no resistance.

“I crouched along with my customers in the restaurant shaking in fear. I could not turn out the lights; neither could I lock my glass doors. We were sitting ducks, but we survived. Instead of walking towards us, the gunmen walked into the platforms and kept shooting.

“At the end of 10 minutes, there was a pile of bodies in the blood-splattered waiting hall. We helped put the injured and dead in passing vehicles to take to the hospital. There was nobody else to help. The police came after half an hour, made enquiries and left. They offered no resistance to the two men who shot scores of people and walked away. It's a scary thought. There is no security left in India. There is no value on life.”

An owner of a restaurant in the main railway terminal in Mumbai

Reports such as these from victims and survivors in the various locations of the attacks were common, expressing disbelief at what was happening as well as incomprehension about what was going on. Hostages often could not distinguish between commandos and terrorists. The attacks seemed random and comprehensive. The fact that multiple sites were involved added to chaos and confusion. Fear and insecurity pervaded the city in the aftermath. Six family members of one survivor were killed. He was a taxi cab driver and said he would probably never drive a cab again.

There is compensation from the Maharashtra State Government available for surviving family members and injured victims but it is limited to \$10,000 for “kin” and \$1,000 for injured victims. Most people anticipate that it will take months, if not years, to receive it. Much of this compensation will reimburse for funeral expenses. Many complained about police response and the length of time of the siege. Since all but one of the terrorists was killed, there was little expectation of any type of justice for survivors. The one terrorist who survived initially claimed to be younger than he was determined to be by the court. He will be tried as an adult.

India has made much progress in the area of victim rights but has little in the way of services, particularly in the area of crisis intervention and post-trauma counseling so it is likely that much of the emotional aftermath will go unaddressed.

Lessons Learned from these Experiences

The lessons learned from these events can be summarized as follows:

1. An assessment of the terrorist threat should be made in all countries along with other types of disasters in each country, so planning can be targeted to certain regions, and coordinated teamwork can be fostered across every type of disaster the populace may face, from terrorist attacks to natural and technological disasters. (note: a side issue here is the high increases of crime after other kinds of disasters.)
2. Planned, knowledgeable and coordinated responses are essential. Training in the types of disaster and the predictable reactions of victims and survivors that might befall a region should be a part of those

Terrorism: Learning from the past and looking at the present

responsible for immediate response. A designated agency or organization should be identified to handle the various threats.

3. Key agencies or organizations that will be involved in a response should be encouraged to work out plans for coordination on-site and in the aftermath.
4. Police protocols should include calling upon social service, mental health, and victim assistance providers to give succor to victims and survivor and to provide referrals where needed.
5. Routinely, countries experiencing such disasters should contact appropriate embassies as foreign nationals are identified among the dead or wounded. This way appropriate notification and referrals can be made within the victims' and survivors' home jurisdiction.
6. Victim assistance organizations in every country should be started and encouraged to prepare for terrorist attacks in their protocols and procedures. IOVA's leadership has long urged the United Nations to sponsor international crisis response teams from various nations with specialized training in cross-cultural service delivery, different justice systems and linguistic capabilities. In areas marked by internal conflict and genocide, such teams should be a part of peace-keeping efforts.
7. Outside help should be immediately available if needed to assist with coordination of aid and comfort.
8. Nation states should be encouraged to establish compensation programs and buttressed by an international compensation program where victimized country's program is inadequate.