

Terror over American cities

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Comment by BUNN NAGARA

TERRORISM knows no civilised bounds: it can strike anywhere at any time, wreaking a terrible toll in human lives and destruction. And because this universal scourge also knows no national frontiers, its reach is global.

As US authorities sift through the carnage in New York and Washington this very moment, much remains unknown about the apparent terrorist attacks in the two cities. But some key elements of these ignominies are already known.

An aircraft smashes into one of New York's two World Trade Center buildings in broad daylight, as commuters hurry to work. Eighteen minutes later, another passenger jet slices into the second tower, killing, maiming, destroying everything for blocks around.

A similar attack strikes the Pentagon, the nerve centre of the US armed forces. Even this building, among the most heavily guarded and secured in the world, stood as helpless as the New York office towers when it crumbled.

New York is the heart of US

business and finance, while Washington is the seat of power and government. Attacks on these two cities are not just symbolic but also substantive, on the body politic as much as on the psyche of the world's sole superpower.

The United States itself has been most active and vocal against terrorist groups, even as its own foreign policies attract the widest controversies. If indeed the tragedies in New York and Washington were part of an elaborate terrorist plan, they would not be the first of such attacks on US nationals and property.

However, the United States is not only the sole superpower but also the leading economy in the world.

This means that yesterday's tragedies will have an impact on much of the trading world, to an extent yet to be fully assessed.

Activity on the New York Stock Exchange has been suspended, and so is stock trading in other countries including Malaysia. Commercial aviation throughout the United States is likewise disrupted, affecting travel and freight arrangements worldwide.

There is clear cause for

heightened concern about personal safety, and suspicions are being raised all-round. Meanwhile, private and government buildings, public places and other centres remain vulnerable to similar attacks.

People around the world will have to be more guarded, if only against the prospect of becoming unwitting victims of further attacks.

While there is no need for undue alarm, Malaysians no less than others will need to be more circumspect. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has cancelled his planned visit to Britain.

The perpetrators of what increasingly look like premeditated mass murders are bloody-minded psychopaths. They have attacked not only a US troop contingent at the Pentagon, but also thousands of innocent civilians in New York and torpedoed a range of national economies.

No cause can justify such evil infamy. Rather than win international sympathy, the yet-to-be-identified terrorists and their struggle will earn only the just opprobrium of the world.