

23/10/2002

How terror war can be won

Abdullah Ahmad

I COULD imagine terrorists attacking anywhere but Bali. I had dismissed the holiday paradise in my mind as a potential target. How wrong I turned out to be.

Terrorism is nothing new. Around 70AD, a group of zealots in Palestine formed the Sicarii, which attacked vacation crowds. Assassins in ancient Persia and Syria systematically killed political leaders, always with a dagger as part of a sacramental act. Political terrorism and assassinations were common in later periods too.

Until the causes of contemporary terrorism are removed, it will be hard to define a terrorist but define the word we must. Some say they are freedom fighters (such as the Palestinians and Irish Republicans). The alQaeda latent troops want to encourage uprising; instead they have triggered government suppression everywhere.

Since the Sicarii, the scale of terror has been multiplied many times by modern weaponry. But the ideological aim of terrorism remains much the same: to enable a minuscule minority to take over a feeble majority by causing disruption, chaos and panic.

Suicide terrorism is also a mega hate crime. My constant fear, as I've said before, is what to do when a terrorist group builds or acquires a nuclear weapon and the means for its delivery. Only psychos hate for no good reason. The type of hate that is volleyed at America and its real and purported lackeys is organised and lethally dangerous. It must be addressed as part of a comprehensive solution to the problem of terrorism.

Defeating and uprooting terrorism will be a long, wide-ranging and arduous process, as the United States well knows. Malaysia fought a running, 12-year-long, vicious war against communist terrorism and we pulled it off. It was a great feat. We'll again overcome any form of terror if the people are united and solidly behind the Government, not otherwise.

The communist insurgency was a war, all right. But the first and best thing the then colonial government did (followed by the rulers of independent Malaya in 1957) was to pretend it wasn't one. It was euphemistically called an "Emergency" (1948-60).

That kept insurance rates down and exports and imports, food and supplies, flowing. Only on that basis could the hearts-and-minds campaign be won. People might not have been allowed to travel to "black areas" or prohibited districts, but they could get to work and back, do their marketing and daily chores in well-policed safety.

In a rare display of grace under pressure right after the Sept 11 attacks, US President George W. Bush exhorted his countrymen to do the best they could to return to normality.

"The best way to fight terrorism is to not let terrorism intimidate America," he told office workers in Washington. "We've all got a job to do." Bravely, the American people rallied. Even the New York Stock Exchange, defying economic gravity, eventually went up.

The biggest challenge for governments and internal security agencies against terror is exactly that: to return people to everyday life, to get them back to work, keep civil society functioning and the economy running. The challenge is doubly great because of the physical impossibility of guarding every national at risk everywhere in the world.

The baseline facts of terrorism and its countermeasures have not changed

since the Bali bombing of Oct 12, nor even by the atrocities of Sept 11. Intelligence gathering may reveal selected danger areas, but the hard truth about international terrorism is that it can explode anywhere - in the US and Western Europe as easily as the recognised flashpoints of the Gulf region and, now, Southeast Asia.

I was thus not surprised when George Tenet, Director of the CIA, told a Congressional panel last week that the risk of a terror attack inside the US was as grave now as it was "the summer before Sept 11".

In other words, the level of threat has not abated after the bombing of Afghanistan, the secondment of US troops in the Philippines, the setting up of a Homeland Security department, the tightening of immigration regulations and the scrutiny of shoes at US airports.

There are no easy answers in the fight against terror. A certain degree of knee-jerk compensation is pardonable in the aftermath of the massacre at Bali.

Even so, it would be foolish to try to make up for an inability to predict specific attacks by clanging alarm bells at every whisper of a potential target.

Last week, Australia, Britain and New Zealand, whose nationals probably constituted most of the nearly 200 victims in the Kuta beach bombing, claimed "disturbing new evidence" of more terrorist threats and told their nationals to leave Indonesia. Australians, who hadn't thought of themselves as deserving of hatred as the Americans in spite of their active support for the US-led war on terror, were warned about Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore.

Sure. But why stop at the southern Pacific stomping grounds of the still nebulous Jemaah Islamiyah? Why not Spain, France or Germany? Or any place else where there are enough Muslims to organise a prayer room? Overreaction of that sort would play handsomely into the hands of the terrorists. Scaremongering doesn't just frighten tourists and expatriates but affects investment and trade. Foreign investment into the region is expected to slow in the wake of the bombing, though economists cannot yet say by how much. Expectedly, the Jakarta stock exchange sank for a couple of days before steadying.

The jitters also hit our stock market and Manila but the KLSE quickly rebounded. Throughout all this, the note of calm delivered by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was striking. As the toll of Kumpulan Militan Malaysia arrests climbed to 68, he told reporters in India that Malaysia had seen it all before and was not only confident of its anti-terrorism measures but prepared for the economic consequences of the funk of foreigners.

Whoever the Bali bombers were - and it is still unclear whether they were Jemaah Islamiyah or al-Qaeda or separatist militias or homicidal maniacs - the horror of the attacks has certainly shaken the world's most populous Muslim country out of its stupor.

Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines will be glad of Jakarta's electrified resolve. Unlike Singapore, however, we have never so much as expressed our official displeasure at our big neighbour's lack of action. We had to respect its government, society, politics, laws and sensitivities. We cannot expect someone else to go after terrorists with the same dexterity until he finds similar grounds to do so himself.

Now that those grounds have been found, Indonesia, a poor country spread over thousands of islands, deserves support. The worst thing the West can do is to spread panic and undermine its Government's capacity to ensure the country's security.

Instead of turning the entire region into a war zone, the West should rebuild confidence and encourage the political stability and economic

growth that are the only antidote for the poison of extremist terrorism. President Megawati Sukarnoputri should be helped, not derided.

So there it is: Fighting terrorism requires equally tough and courageous methods to prevent panic, bring back normality and secure peace. That is partly why Washington's imminent attack on Iraq is so ill-advised and ill-timed. It is an unwarranted and counterproductive deviation from the main thrust. It won't curb terrorism but is likely to inflame more fanatical would-be martyrs into joining the anti-American cause.

As if to reinforce that point, a series of al-Qaeda-linked attacks, including the bombing in Indonesia, were carried out in the very week that Congress was giving Bush the authorisation he sought to attack Iraq unilaterally. I think it is time the US rethinks its priorities. I'm glad Bush is giving diplomacy one more chance to resolve the Iraq problem.

The US must be clearer on the concept that Islam is a tolerant, even relaxed religion, had it not been hijacked by those who use its vitality and youthful militancy to force changes of government.

Militant Islam is absolutely certain of the truth of the faith, and believes that only it knows the gospel! Not all militant Islamists are terrorists or inclined that way. However, their objective is the same: the establishment of theocratic Islamic nations.

Like the militant Christians before them, they are not going to soften or be particularly tolerant. Make no mistake: they will never quit from mental, spiritual and material strife until the totality of their version of Islam governs the destinies of every Muslim or Muslim-majority nation.

All Malaysians felt the shudder of the Bali blasts in our bones. It was a reminder that the Government must never compromise with either extremism or terrorism.

Perhaps concessions may be advisable in some exceptional cases. Still, I believe consistent adjustment or indulgence on their account is destined to claim a higher toll in human life and will diminish political will in the long run.

Conventionally, a government facing a determined terrorist or extremist danger often opts for a hard-line policy: either the government defeats it or it overthrows the government and hangs the leadership and those in cahoots with them.