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Je Suis Garissa – the unheard cry

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The murder of nearly 150 students, selected because they were Christians, highlights the need for greater international collective will to defeat terrorism / By **AGBONKHIANMEGHE E. OROBATOR**

'Je suis Garissa' – the unheard cry

THE NEWS BROKE on Holy Thursday of the deadliest terrorist attack in Kenya since the 1998 bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi. At dawn, elements of the Somali-based Islamist group al-Shabaab stormed the campus of Garissa University College, in the north-eastern town of Garissa, and took several hundred students hostage.

By the time security agents ended the siege 15 hours later, at least 142 mostly Christian students had been slaughtered, and several dozen injured. Survivors crawled out of hiding to give chilling accounts of cold-blooded murder presided by terrorists who took their time to taunt and then either stab or shoot innocent students to death. In some cases, the terrorists took calls on victims' cellphones and callously informed anxious parents and relatives of the progress of the slaughter of their loved ones.

As the butchery unfolded, one of the group's representatives boasted to a BBC journalist that Kenyans would be horrified when they saw the scale of what happened in the hostels. True to their colours, al-Shabaab did not disappoint. The official casualty count has risen to 148 dead. Security sources and Red Cross officials estimate a much higher figure. As these things go in Kenya, we might never know the full extent of this carnage.

There are several disturbing aspects of this

horrific attack. First is the religious motive of the terrorists. Not for the first time, al-Shabaab deliberately targeted Christians as part of their quest to foment religious conflict in Kenya. The attackers separated their victims on the basis of faith allegiance. Those who could show evidence of Muslim faith or instant conversion to Islam were spared. The Christians were gunned down. There is a clear intent to drive a wedge between the already polarised Christian and Muslim communities in Kenya – a pattern of religious zealotry characteristic of other Islamist militant groups, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria.

Then there is the issue of how the Kenyan authorities handle intelligence information – the consensus among analysts is that they do not take intelligence warnings as seriously as they should. The latest attack is one in a string of carefully coordinated assaults by al-Shabaab. Security agents and the intelligence services should have seen it coming, not least because several foreign Governments, including the UK, recently issued a terror alert that covered parts of Kenya, including the border with Somalia. Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta rubbished the ensuing advice not to travel – the day before the terrorists stormed Garissa.

Kenya is a top tourist destination in East Africa, and the Government is keen to reassure travellers that it is a safe place to take a vaca-

tion. Balancing the economic benefits of foreign leisure seekers with security threats to ordinary Kenyans has proved a daunting task for the Government. Sadly, the tendency to dismiss warnings and project an image of the country as a tourist haven has repeatedly proved costly for innocent Kenyans.

Al-Shabaab maintains that its attacks are justified as retaliation for Kenya's military incursion into Somalia. In 2011 Kenyan forces crossed the border to stem the rising tide of terrorist attacks and kidnappings masterminded from Somalia. Other African countries soon joined in the effort under the auspices of the African Union. There have been repeated calls for the Kenyan Government to review its engagement in Somalia and to determine whether it is meeting the stated objectives.

The Government remains adamant that the strategy is working. But incidents like Garissa indicate that the tactic of curtailing the menace

the mass arrest of Kenyan-Somalis, especially in Nairobi's ethnic Somali district of Eastleigh – only stokes the resentment of law-abiding Kenyan Muslims, who are just as traumatised and afraid of al-Shabaab as the Christians.

Second, Kenyatta confessed to a chronic shortage of security personnel to guarantee the safety of all Kenyans. Everybody knows that. There were only two security details assigned to the sprawling campus of Garissa University College. A planned recruitment of 10,000 new security personnel has been marred by allegations of corruption and is stalled as a legal battle between competing security agencies and politicians rumbles on. The president's executive order to proceed with this recruitment exercise immediately is a step in the right direction.

Attacks like Garissa reflect a situation of great complexity. But to deal effectively with this threat, we need a Government that has the capacity to remain focused and transparent, to provide credible intelligence-based information, and to correctly assess security risks and act decisively on terror alerts. Besides, the threat from al-Shabaab targets several East African countries that form part of the African Union Mission in Somalia (Amisom).

These countries face a common enemy that demands a coordinated response. The level of cooperation and intelligence-sharing among them needs to improve considerably. The simple wisdom that two heads are better than one should be recognised. The religious undercurrents of recent attacks ought to be taken seriously, albeit religion serves only as fig leaf for the criminality of a distorted jihadist ideology. Notwithstanding the terrorists' claim to act in the name of Islam, their actions are morally repulsive and they soil the image of Islam as a peaceful religion.

Religious communities and their leaders should do more than just condemn these actions. If the growing radicalisation of Africa's youth by religious bigots and terrorist organisations is to be reversed, community leaders must develop a counter-narrative, backed by

strategic interreligious activities and cooperation. This task cannot be left to self-interested politicians. This is a moment for religious leaders to stand up and be counted.

Although world leaders have roundly condemned the Garissa attack, the incident is mostly portrayed as a Kenyan problem. Unlike the global outpouring of solidarity in the wake of the attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* office in Paris, there are no throngs of presidents and prime ministers heading to Kenya to proclaim "*Je suis Garissa*".

Kenyatta is right when he argues that simply increasing the number of warnings to tourists not to travel to certain areas is not the solution. Al-Shabaab is inebriated by the same witches' brew that nourishes al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, Islamic State and a growing network of terrorist organisations with a global reach. The lack of solidarity and collective will to resist and defeat their agenda emboldens pedlars of sectarian violence and sponsors of jihadist insurgency. They know that they can strike again and get away with it. And they will.

At times like these, as we have seen in Nigeria, the biggest casualty of this cycle of terrorist impunity is trust in the ability of the Government to protect its citizens. We are all sitting targets united in grief and fear.

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of terrorism at source could leave citizens vulnerable to attacks inside Kenya. The morass of the ongoing military entanglement in Somalia poses a huge strategic and political challenge to the Government of Kenya.

All of this suggests that part of the problem is inept leadership. Kenyans are familiar with the ritual response from their leaders whenever terrorists strike. The President, flanked by his deputy and security chiefs, delivers a televised address, offers condolences to victims' families, declares a period of mourning and makes a stirring pledge to defeat the terrorists and bring the perpetrators to justice. But nothing really changes – until the next attack happens.

This time, in his address, President Kenyatta was right about two things. First, he admitted that the terrorists are "deeply embedded" in Kenyan Muslim communities. This observation is undeniable. But the preferred government response – a security sweep and