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News

Any community, anywhere, can find itself coping with the after-effects of this modern scourge

Northern Ireland's tragic experiences of terrorism are far from unique writes SIR KENNETH BLOOMFIELD. The former Civil Service chief, who was appointed by Mo Mowlam to serve as a one man victims commission, has just returned from a conference in Vienna where representatives from 70 nations pooled their experiences

Sunday, October 07, 2007

IN September 1988 my wife, young son and I had direct experience of an act of terrorism.

In the darkness of early morning an "active service unit" of the Provisional IRA had placed around our house four bombs of Libyan-supplied semtex.

We emerged from the ruins of our home of 19 years physically unharmed, but with a heightened consciousness of the threat of terror to democratic values.

Some nine years later, Tony Blair's new Labour government had accorded to the Northern Ireland question a very high place on its agenda.

With much talk of possible amnesties or prisoner releases, a great many survivors or relatives of victims expressed a fear of being left behind, with their prolonged suffering disregarded and unacknowledged.

In this setting the Secretary of State, Mo Mowlam, asked me to serve as a one-man Victims Commission, to advise government on how the suffering of victims of "the Troubles" could best be recognised.

In accepting this sensitive assignment, I could not know that it would continue to involve me in different aspects of the impact of terrorism until the present day.

My report, We Will Remember Them, published in 1998, concentrated on measures of practical support for those who survived, but also included recommendations to review the system of compensation for criminal injuries and to facilitate efforts to recover the bodies of "the disappeared" - men and women murdered without an opportunity to defend themselves physically or legally and committed to unknown graves.

In 1999, a review group which I chaired made proposals relating to criminal injuries compensation, and in the same year both the British and Irish parliaments legislated to establish an Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains, on which I continue to serve.

Unhappily the tragic experiences of so many in Northern Ireland have not been unique in today's troubled world.

I was fascinated to find that an organisation based in Guernica had published my 1998 report in both Castilian and Basque.

Meanwhile, around the world, community after community came to feel the impact of terror.

In June of this year I was surprised to receive an e-mail from Warsaw. It came to me from the Warsaw-based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), an arm of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

The message conveyed an invitation to act as moderator for a session of a " high-level meeting on victims of terrorism" to be convened in Vienna in September.

My acceptance afforded me an extraordinary and privileged experience. We met at the Conference Centre in the grand setting of the Hofburg, the huge palace complex from which Austro-Hungarian Emperors once ruled their polyglot dominions.

From the moderator's seat one faced the delegates from around 70 nation states, including not only virtually every European country from Andorra to Liechtenstein, but successor states of the Soviet Union like Turkmenistan or Kazakhstan, and nations further afield such as Israel and Afghanistan.

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In addition, the meeting was attended by representatives of numerous NGOs from around the world, often representing the specific interests of those affected by a particular outrage - be it 9/11, the Bali bombings or the Beslan siege.

It was a moving experience not merely to listen to, but to meet, people who had suffered so much. In the opening session, we addressed questions very familiar to me from my work in our own jurisdiction:

- ¿ How can solidarity with victims of terrorism act as a factor in the prevention of further terrorism?
- ¿ What are the distinguishing features of victims of terrorism?
- ¿ Is it important to differentiate between victims of terrorism and victims of violent crimes more generally?
- ¿ Are there risks in creating a hierarchy of victims?
- ¿ Could the occupation of a casualty of a terrorist act affect his or her status as a victim?

Later sessions would consider how to ensure appropriate assistance to victims of terrorist acts - how the interests of the victims can be properly represented in legal proceedings and how the players in civil society can best promote solidarity with the victims of terrorism.

In due course ODIHR will publish a detailed account of these proceedings. It was evident that, at present, the degree of support for victims varies greatly from country to country, and that there is much to learn from best practice.

What was all too clear was that any community, anywhere, can find itself coping with the after-effects of this modern scourge of indiscriminate terrorism.

As one sat at the top table, confronting that huge range of national delegations, served by a battery of translators, it was to recognise the importance and timeliness of this important initiative and the broad international response to it.

No one listening to the powerful and affecting stories brought to the meeting by so many could fail to appreciate the urgent need for a humane and world-wide response.

In our support of those who have suffered so much, we demonstrate our abhorrence of the callous methods and spurious justifications of terror.

In my native Northern Ireland I have met many of the disabled, the widows, the relatives with no known grave to visit.

As I spoke at the Hofburg to the Canadian widow of a victim of 9/11, and as I heard through the voice of a translator a personal account of the carnage at Beslan, I reflected once again on the truth of the adage "No man is an island".

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