

As US media suggest targets for military attack

Death toll mounts in East African bombings

Editorial Board
11 August 1998

The death toll in the bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania rose to 210 Monday, with as many as 100 others missing and feared dead in the rubble of the US embassy in the Kenyan capital city, Nairobi.

More than 5,000 people were injured in the twin blasts, the vast majority in Nairobi, where the US embassy is located at a busy intersection in the center of the city. Nairobi's hospitals were choked with wounded people, with more than 500 requiring extensive treatment.

The embassy in Dar-es-Salaam, the Tanzanian capital, is in the diplomatic quarter, a quiet residential neighborhood distant from the downtown area. Casualties were accordingly much lighter. Ten people died and 70 were wounded.

The death toll was the worst in an attack on a US facility overseas since the October 1983 truck bombing of a US Marine barracks in Beirut which killed 241 soldiers. The largest number of dead were in an office building, the Ufundi House, adjacent to the US embassy, which collapsed under the impact of the blast. The upper floors of the building pancaked down, leaving a pile of rubble only two stories high, crushing most of those inside. The other large concentration of deaths was in several buses passing by the embassy at the time of the blast.

Thirty six of the dead in Nairobi have been identified as employees of the embassy, 12 of them Americans and 24 Kenyans. As many as 100 more Kenyan employees of the embassy are missing and feared dead. Excavation of the embassy site has been delayed by the enormous scale of the damage and by conflicts between US officials and Kenyan rescue workers.

There have been numerous press accounts about the indifference of US military and government officials towards the largely Kenyan victims of the tragedy. The BBC reported that US investigators have sealed off the embassy, even refusing entry to Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi.

The *Financial Times*, the leading British business daily, cited complaints that US marines had rejected requests for picks and shovels when hundreds of rescue workers were frantically digging into the Ufundi House wreckage with their bare hands. A Kenyan police captain told the newspaper, 'The French are here, the Israelis are here, the Red Cross are helping and the Hindis are giving us food. Where are our American brothers?'

An ambulance worker said, 'The Americans have behaved like [obscenity] from day one.'

Mike Sheldon, the chief administrator of Nairobi Hospital, said he found it 'very puzzling' that three US doctors sent on the day of the blast 'didn't do anything. Nothing.' Not one of the hundreds of American soldiers, FBI agents and other personnel who have poured into Nairobi over the weekend has participated in the rescue efforts at Ufundi House and other heavily damaged buildings around the embassy.

Vincent Nicod, head of the Red Cross delegation in Nairobi, said that US officials were concentrating on security matters, not rescue. 'They were checking through rubble to see what kind of paper flew out of the embassy,' he told the *Chicago Tribune* reporter on the scene.

The Nairobi embassy is the second largest US facility in sub-Saharan Africa, exceeded in size only by the embassy in South Africa. The six-story building was the base for CIA and military intelligence operations as well as the diplomatic service.

At least two of those killed in the embassy were military intelligence officers, and another, Tom Shah, was described as a State Department 'political officer,' the usual cover posting for CIA agents. The State Department refused to release any information on Shah, although it released biographical and family data on other victims of the bombing.

While Kenyan and Red Cross rescue workers criticized the US response, American officials criticized the Kenyan rescue effort on the grounds that it may have destroyed evidence that could be used to identify those responsible for the bombing. The embassy's security chief was filmed by a local television station shouting at Kenyan policemen who were seeking to shift wreckage to find people buried underneath.

There were conflicting reports about the progress of local police investigations into the two bombings. In Nairobi, several eyewitnesses reported seeing a group of men jump out of a yellow truck and throw grenades or other explosive devices at the embassy just before the main explosion.

In Dar es-Salaam, police announced Monday that they had arrested several suspects, but they gave no details of the evidence linking those arrested to the bombing or of the nationality of the suspects. The Tanzania bomb was believed to

have been on board a water truck owned by the embassy and driven by two longtime employees. Both drivers died in the explosion, as did five Tanzanian guards who had permitted the truck to enter the embassy compound.

There has been no credible statement claiming responsibility for the bomb atrocity. Phone calls to several Middle East newspapers claimed the bombing was carried out by a previously unknown Islamic radical group calling itself 'Islamic Army for the Liberation of the Moslem Holy Sites.'

The Moslem Brotherhood, one of the largest Islamic fundamentalist groups, issued a statement in Cairo condemning the attacks on the US embassies and warning that these could now become the pretext for attacks on Islamic and Arab interests in the Middle East and elsewhere.

The lack of either physical evidence or statements of responsibility did not stop the American media from publishing lists of likely suspects for the terrorist attack, names supplied by either US or Israeli intelligence services. The most frequently mentioned individual was Osama bin Laden, a Saudi Arabian multi-millionaire now living in exile in Afghanistan.

Thomas Friedman, the foreign affairs columnist for the *New York Times*, suggested that Iran or Iraq was likely responsible, while the *International Herald Tribune*, a joint publication of the *Times* and the *Washington Post*, cited British experts pointing the finger at Iraq, Sudan and Somalia.

The report in the *International Herald Tribune*, published less than 24 hours after the explosions, began by declaring that the embassy bombings were 'acts of war and the United States could take reprisals against the bombers under international law without approval of the United Nations.'

According to a British expert cited by the newspaper, 'If Americans find Iraqi connections that could lift the lid right off. If this were the case, I would not be surprised if there were a direct action against Saddam Hussein.'

The *Wall Street Journal* chimed in on Monday with an editorial blasting the Clinton administration for not having ordered military retaliation for the earlier bombing of a US military barracks in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia in 1996--against whom, the newspaper did not say.

Giving its prescription for action, the *Journal* declared, 'President Reagan bombed Tripoli, Libya, and within a short time the terrorist streak wound down.' On its news pages the newspaper published an article listing a dozen potential targets, from Angola to Pakistan, and including Libya, Iraq, Iran and Palestinian Arab groups.

US government officials were more cautious in their public statements, but Defense Secretary William Cohen, interviewed on the Sunday ABC news program *This Week*, recalled the 1986 bombing raids on Libya as a precedent for military action.

Israeli officials were more emphatic. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu blamed 'international terrorism centered on Islamic fundamentalism,' and offered the assistance of Israeli intelligence agencies in tracking down the bombers.

The strident press campaign and the government statements have ominous and disturbing implications. They suggest that the US government hopes to use the tragic loss of life in Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam to accomplish now what it could not do last February--win public backing to launch a military strike against Iraq or other targets in the Middle East.

The US media reaction underscores how unreliable and biased the US agencies investigating the tragedy are. Little, if any, credence can be given to whatever evidence is produced by the FBI and CIA agents who have flooded into Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam.

It is worth noting that none of the regimes and organizations listed as likely suspects would actually benefit from the bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. On the contrary, the principal beneficiaries could well be militaristic elements in the United States, as well as Israel, who were frustrated by the deal brokered between UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and Saddam Hussein which deprived the US government of its pretext for bombing Baghdad.

The provocative and reckless character of the US media coverage makes it difficult to avoid the suspicion that those who stand to benefit from these atrocities may have had a hand in organizing them. Even if it turns out that individuals motivated by Arab nationalism or Islamic fundamentalism actually carried out the attack, it is quite possible that their actions were manipulated and directed by intelligence agencies like the CIA and the Israeli Mossad, which have a long record of such provocations, and possess the high level of technical skill needed to coordinate two explosions in cities nearly 500 miles apart.

It is predictable that the American media excludes such a possibility from its long list of likely perpetrators. But this only illustrates why such terroristic attacks are always so reactionary: they play directly into the hands of imperialism, and, on more than one occasion, have been instigated for precisely that reason.

See Also:

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[8 August 1998]



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