

AFTER NAIROBI: RECOVERING FROM TERROR

AFTER A TRAUMATIC BOMBING, WE FOUND THAT INDIVIDUALS HEAL IN DIFFERENT WAYS —
BUT COMMUNITY IS ESSENTIAL TO THE HEALING PROCESS.

BY PRUDENCE BUSHNELL

This article is dedicated to everyone who was hurt, everyone who helped, and everyone whose life was affected by the bombing of the U.S. embassy in Nairobi on Aug. 7, 1998.

In the summer of 1998, I was serving as U.S. ambassador to Kenya. It was my first ambassadorship, and after two years, I had hit my stride. I was leading a terrific team of people who were excited about what we were accomplishing and who shared my belief in the worth of our efforts and our community.

Embassy Nairobi, like most others you find around the world, was an amalgam of U.S. government agencies promoting U.S. interests. In our case, these ranged from regional responsibilities to support other embassies in Africa, to helping Kenyans deepen their culture of democracy, enhance economic potential, provide humanitarian assistance, eradicate diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria, and conserve a wonderful biodiversity. We were the second largest post in the sub-Saharan with over 700 employees, most of them Kenyan, working out of our embassy downtown and other buildings around the city.

On Aug. 7, 1998, the summer transition cycle was coming to an end. We were welcoming newcomers, filling the jobs left vacant by personnel gaps, and waiting for the American school to reopen and signal the end of summer.

Prudence Bushnell is the U.S. ambassador to Guatemala. From 1996 to 1999, she served as ambassador to Kenya. She has been an FSO since 1981 and previously served in Senegal, India and Washington, D.C. This article is based on a speech the author gave in Oklahoma City, Okla., on April 19, 2000 — the fifth anniversary of the bombing in that city of the Murrah Federal Building.

Friday meant the weekly staff meeting, and I had asked folks to discuss how new people were settling in. Nairobi, with a deteriorating infrastructure, miserable poverty and high crime rate, was not an easy city and we were always trying to find a balance between keeping people alert to security threats and scaring them into seclusion. So, security was once again the main topic. It was unusual that I was absent, but I had gotten an appointment to meet with the Kenyan minister of commerce, whose office was just behind our building, and I didn't want to miss it.

What was not unusual for a Friday was the activity in the embassy. People were cashing checks for the weekend, visiting the medical unit or coming to shop at the commissary. Others were working through the last day of the week, thinking about the weekend. On the busy street corner outside, Nairobi citizens were also going about their business.

At 10:37 a.m., a truck entered our rear parking lot, sandwiched between the embassy, a 21-story bank building (where I was meeting with the minister), and a seven-story office building. Moments later, the driver detonated the 2,000-pound bomb that was the truck's cargo. Its force in such a confined area blasted through and bounced off the surrounding buildings. Everything and everyone in its path were destroyed. The seven-story building collapsed, the bank building where I was shuddered but held. The embassy, built to withstand earthquakes, took the impact from the rear, and almost everything inside was demolished. Over 5,000 people were injured, most from shattered glass in the face and chest area, and 213 lay dead. Inside the embassy, the blast instantly killed 46 of the 100-plus occupants; it injured and trapped many more.

In the bank building a few yards away, I was unaware of the extent of destruction and chaos outside. Initially knocked out by the bomb blast, which I thought was

directed at the bank, I started down the 21 flights of stairs with one of my U.S. Commerce Department colleagues. Along with hundreds of bloodied people crushed together, we went down those endless stairs littered with debris and rubble and were soon engulfed in smoke. If we could get out alive, I kept thinking, we would find safety in the embassy. That thought evaporated as soon as we saw the burning hulk of our building and the carnage around it. We were spotted almost immediately and pushed into a car that was ordered away. "Get her out of here!" people yelled. No way would they risk anything further happening to the U.S. ambassador. My colleagues and I sped to a nearby hotel, where, as we hoped, we found a doctor.

A Single-Minded Focus

Kenyan resources were overwhelmed. Waves of walking wounded staggered into understaffed and under-resourced hospitals, and the bare hands of volunteer citizens were all that was initially available to dig through the rubble of the office building that had adjoined the embassy. When it came to rescuing those inside the embassy, we Americans were on our own.

While some of the staff cobbled together assistance supplies for the bombsite, others had contacted Washington with the start of a long list of Nairobi's needs. We got teams organized to search morgues, hospitals and homes for the missing, and as the news spread, community members fanned out to help the families of those we knew were lost. No task was too heroic or too mundane. Whatever panic we may have felt was directed toward the singular focus of doing what was necessary to save people's lives. By the end of a long day, we had organized ourselves into a purposeful community.

By the time I got home that night, our 24-hour operations center was in its second shift and our colleagues in Washington, seven hours behind Nairobi time, were frantically expediting search and rescue teams and supplies. Our most severely injured were in the hospital, a medical evacuation aircraft was on its way, and we were becoming aware of our losses. I was too exhausted to sleep and afraid of the nightmares I might have. I remember lying in bed with a sense of devastation and numbness superimposed on percussions of the blast captured in every cell of my body. The radio station was playing sad music in-between calls for blood supplies. Downtown, the rescue efforts went on.

The Community Comes Together

Over the next two days, hundreds of people arrived from the United States and other countries to help, but for us, the worst had already come to pass. In those long

hours after the bombing, the victims-turned-rescuers had become a tight, protective and insular community. As utterly exhausted as we were, we stubbornly refused to relinquish control of what we thought of as our tragedy. As the one responsible for the lives of American citizens in Kenya, I was particularly adamant about the need to stay in charge.

Forty-eight hours after the blast, American members of the mission gathered at my residence to hold the first of many services — this one to remember, honor and say good-bye to our 12 American colleagues who were leaving in coffins accompanied by their families the next day. It was a beautiful ceremony as one by one we rose to talk about the character and contributions of those who only days earlier had been our family, friends and co-workers. Among those to speak was my Kenyan driver. "I am a Kenyan by birth," he said, "but today I have become a Kenyan-American because I share your sorrow in the loss of these people." His words captured the sentiment of many.

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During the next week we began dealing with the trauma's aftereffects. With the help of local and visiting counselors, we held debriefing sessions for all mission staff and organized another service to honor our 36 Kenyan colleagues who had died.

We faced a myriad of other tasks, which we shared with the people who had come to help. We were immensely grateful to them, but frankly did little to make them a part of us. We were we — they were they. Even people who had transferred from the embassy only weeks earlier found themselves treated as outsiders. I think, in retrospect, that we were not an easy group to help, but the teams were sensitive enough to take their cues from us — a gesture for which I will be forever grateful. When eight days after the bombing I ordered all mission staff home for the weekend, our visiting colleagues took charge without a question, giving us the time-out we desperately needed.

In those first days of despair and self-rescue, I felt a synergy with the community I will likely never again expe-

rience, made all the more powerful by hugs, sacrifice, tears and a determination to stand up to the effort to destroy us. If that sense of oneness dissipated over the ensuing months, the culture of interdependency we had created remained strong — and instrumental to overcoming the hardships ahead.

When I attended the official memorial service in Washington in September, I remember telling my sister about the huge abyss I felt between my own shattered inner reality and the normalcy of life in the United States. I was anxious to return to Nairobi, not just to begin reconstruction efforts, but also to take comfort among those I felt understood and perhaps shared the foreign sensations inside me.

Others may have felt a similar need, because although the State Department gave all embassy personnel the option to leave post, few chose to do so. Even many of the severely wounded chose to come back — many with shards of glass still in them. Motivations differed — children in school, reluctance to put families through the additional stress of moving and starting new jobs — but I also think that instinctively people felt that sticking together and rebuilding would somehow help in healing. The courage I saw in the decisions to stay was key to keeping me going.

A Long Way From Normal

It was not easy, however. When the rescue workers left, the Washington crisis task force disbanded and the press moved on to other stories, we confronted a new reality. Squeezed with our colleagues into the poorly constructed USAID building, surrounded by barbed wire, sandbags, sniffer dogs and Marines in combat gear, we were constantly reminded of failure. Phones and faxes didn't work, computers, equipment and files had

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been destroyed, and everything took too long to come together. We dearly missed our dead colleagues and quickly learned just how much the Kenyans, in particular, contributed to the running of the mission. Lacking a single point of contact with Washington once the task force disbanded, we became frustrated with our colleagues there, who now had other crises to tend to, and they became frustrated with us.

Anger was a key ingredient in the culture in which we were living. It had also hit other Nairobi survivors, who could ill afford the immense loss of life and property. The terrorists were far away, and vague figures, but Americans were right there. Had it not been for our presence, many said, such death and destruction would not have come to Kenya. Publicly and privately, we were criticized for our reactions in the hours after the blast. The security cordon we set up was seen as an act of hostility and our focus on saving our own people in the embassy, a sign of indifference to Kenyan needs. We, in turn, were hurt and frustrated by their interpretation of events, and for a while it looked as if the terrorists might have succeeded in rupturing an old friendship. But on we plowed, adding public relations to the many tasks we faced. Eventually

the anger subsided, in them and in us. But it took many months.

Diverse Roads to Recovery

By October, I was witnessing the huge diversity of human response to trauma — Kenyans and Americans were all over the place in terms of their reactions and recovery. Some were doing all right, and some were not. Some wanted to move on with their lives; others still needed to mourn. Responses had nothing to do with gender, race, culture or proximity to the blast.

Ironically, the counseling services we had engaged were largely ignored. We in foreign affairs are still reluctant to deal openly with mental health issues, and many Kenyan cultures have a similar tradition of masking feelings. Clearly, however, many were grappling with emotions we didn't like or understand. A couple of months after having spent hours in the bombed-out embassy, for example, I suddenly became almost physically ill from being inside that place of death, and I couldn't understand why. Disciplined intellect and rational thought were no match for what overpowered me after one seemingly routine visit.

By Christmas, when U.S. embassies around the world were put on alert of another possible attack, I knew I had to take steps to take care of myself. Terrorism was no longer an abstract concept, and during one of our many meetings on security, I wondered whether I would have the wherewithal to cope with another disaster. When we closed the embassy and cancelled holiday activities, I was at an all-time low.

It was then that the power of family and community really kicked in. If at times some of us felt unduly vulnerable, short-tempered or off mark in our performance, others felt OK and picked up the slack. The diversity

in our reactions to trauma, which was in some respects troubling, was also a blessing. The newcomers and temporary personnel who had chosen to leave jobs and family to help us in Nairobi were a particular source of strength because they were so clearly dedicated and fresh — and this time we were making deliberate efforts to incorporate them into our community. Physical proximity in the cramped USAID building also helped, especially because we had quite consciously established strong norms around tolerance and mutual support.

What also helped were the observations and advice of people who had experienced the 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City and the 1983 bombing of our embassy in Beirut. Validating normal, abnormal or no feelings at all was comforting. Meanwhile, the letters and, eventually, e-mails from family, friends and colleagues around the world also helped confront a sense of real and emotional isolation.

We Survive 1998

We had begun using rituals to mourn, celebrate and bring us together even before the experts told us they were important. The many funerals and memorial services we attended had served us well in sharing our profound sorrow, but we reached a point when we needed a milestone to mark survival. The annual Marine Ball in mid-November was our first community celebration of life. I remember dancing to the Gloria Gaynor song, "I Will Survive," as a virtual act of defiance. Visits of Cabinet members and other senior officials also marked our progress as the focus shifted from funerals to business. One of these visits resulted in a better-coordinated system with Washington and, slowly but surely, the work was to become easier.

On New Year's Eve, we gathered

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at the Nairobi game park for the traditional sundowner. Nature gave us one of her most spectacular sunsets, as "Auld Lang Syne" played in the background. We hugged, cried, and once again shared a moment of solidarity, but this time marked with hope. We had survived 1998!

That moment represented a turning point for me. Finally, things began to come together. Office systems were functioning, and we had found a building to which to move while a new embassy was constructed. Those of us who watched our Marine security guards raise the U.S. flag on the pedestal we saved from the old embassy felt that indescribable pride of being an American. A congressional supplemental budget, which included \$30 million to assist Kenyans, finally gave us the tangible wherewithal to show our concern for Nairobi's losses. The criminal investigations into the source of the attack had yielded some results. The most seriously wounded of our colleagues were returning; new people were being hired and trained.

In late January, we marked another step of our journey as we dedicated a memorial garden on the beautiful grounds of the ambassador's residence. The rim of its fountain was made of bricks

inscribed with the names of all who had died in our building. For me, it was a symbol that I had finally gathered back the community that exploded on August 7. Bereaved family members from as far away as the United States attended what for many was another important ritual of healing.

Soon after, the focus and activities shifted again. Like many of my colleagues, I was leaving Nairobi in early summer at the end of my three-year tour of duty, and preparations for a major transition began. Those who were staying would be moving either to the new, temporary building or to other quarters — the USAID building was far too insecure for permanent occupation — and once again the mission staff would be scattered around the city. The old embassy was being demolished, and we needed to consider what would happen to the land on which it had stood.

There remained a host of administrative issues surrounding our assistance to Kenyan victims, the welfare of permanently disabled employees, the estates of those who died. And I was once again struck by the nature of our community as an amalgam of diverse individuals going separate ways in thought and recovery.

March came and we again sought the help of mental health experts, and of trainers from the Foreign Service Institute, to take our emotional pulse and to recommend ways to help ease the stressful time ahead. I was particularly concerned about Kenyan employees who would bear the brunt of the changes. If counseling was not the answer for some, perhaps less threatening methods through training could help build the skills and confidence necessary to confront more major change. We also worked through how we would deal with the

long-term needs of the injured and the possible unanticipated needs of those of us who would soon be scattered around the world. The deputy chief of mission — the transitional leader before the arrival of the new ambassador — and I met in groups with our Kenyan colleagues to respond to concerns and give whatever information we could about their future. And, we made plans with the Kenyan government and private sector to turn the old embassy site into a memorial park.

A Heartfelt Farewell

Slowly, I realized that I had done my best for the community and became more comfortable with the thought of leaving. The rhythm into which our work pattern had fallen continued uninterrupted, and I was beginning to think my departure would go unnoticed — a blow to my ego! On the day before wheels-up, as my husband and I were bringing the farewell routines to closure, we stopped by the deputy chief of mission's residence on a last-minute errand. There, flanked on either side of the driveway, was the entire mission community, smiling and waving as we drove in. Seven to eight hundred people had conspired to keep secret a going-away party — so much for knowing my own community! The final ritual I celebrated with my embassy family was extraordinary. We were OK, and I could leave with some sense of peace.

Over the summer of 1999, a new community was formed at Embassy Nairobi. The mission marked the anniversary of Aug. 7 at the residence memorial garden, while those of us who were in Washington remembered and honored our former colleagues at a ceremony in the State Department. I sat through the ceremony clinging to the hand of the colleague who had walked those

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21 flights of stairs with me, and later exchanged hugs and greetings with some of the people with whom I had shared sorrow and trauma. Most of us had come a very long way in a year.

Last October, my husband, my office manager and I joined the American embassy community in Guatemala, where we now face new challenges and adventures. Now and then, unexpectedly, I still feel the grip of an effect — like the first time I drove into my new embassy's underground parking lot, a virtual replica of the one in Nairobi. My sorrow is still profound and, I now understand, will likely always be a part of me. But I have learned to just let it be, and that I can turn to others for help, not as an act of weakness but as an act of inclusiveness that most people appreciate.

I have come to realize that natural disasters and, unfortunately, man-made terrorist acts are a part of modern life. Oklahoma City and Nairobi are not the only communities in this world who have suffered. I have met many survivors of terror in Guatemala and the United States, and learned of many more in news reports and history books. I have concluded that we survivors have much to offer the world because we represent just that —

survival. It is natural to feel helpless in the face of terrorism, but we don't need to wallow in it. We can anticipate the future, we can take preventive measures, and, in fact, we have. We can and should find the resources to better protect the many members of the foreign affairs community who still work in unsafe buildings around the world. But what we can't do is think that we have defeated terrorism because of a temporary lull. That's why it's important to learn how people survive — and why I seek to share my experiences.

I have learned that each of us walks at a different pace as we struggle to recover, but we do pass similar markers. My observations are, of course, personal, and my story unique. But I hope that by talking about what I experienced as an individual and member of a community, I will contribute to a base of knowledge about what journeys back from terror are like and how they can be made easier.

Right after my embassy and neighborhood blew up, I kept wondering, "Why did they do this?" Well, I figured it out: The point is to kill, wound and frighten people into submission. Shattered souls, anger, turmoil, mistrust, sorrow, and all of the other disabling effects of terror may bring us close to the edge, but we don't have to stay there. We can walk away, as people in Nairobi and lots of other places have done. We can learn to trust life again, even as we continue to feel the hurt.

And that painful journey can be made easier by harnessing the collective strength and power of the community. It can also be made easier by learning from one another and incorporating survival experiences into discussions of terrorism. If we can't always defeat the bullies, we can sure stand up to them, and that's a critical step. ■