

# Dealing with 'lone wolf' terror acts

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Two recent violent incidents in the bustling and pretty Australian city of Sydney throw up challenges to law enforcement of a country that prides itself for its benign but firm approach to maintaining public order in a multi-ethnic society. Recall the Novak Djokovic episode of a few years ago when he was refused entry and confined before being returned to his home country for refusing to be vaccinated before playing at the Australian Open tennis.

The city's leafy suburbs never cease to charm you. It is difficult to digest that such environs could provide a haven to two ostensibly deranged persons who, last week, wreaked havoc on a peace-loving population through senseless stabbing of innocent persons.

One attack was at the popular Westfield Mall close to the ever-crowded world famous Bondi beach. This killed six persons. The other was at the local Assyrian Church targeting Bishop Mar Mari Emmanuel who was conducting the service when he was knifed by a teenager. Several were injured, including the Bishop.

There was no nexus between the two incidents. Still the audacity and recklessness of both the assailants stand out. While the police ruled out terrorism in the Mall attack, they looked upon the church assault as an act of terror committed out of religious bias.

What surprises this writer is that a knife and not a firearm was employed in the two crimes. In most of the developed world — except perhaps the UK — the gun is the preferred weapon to commit a crime. Was a knife used in Sydney because gun availability is strictly controlled in Australia? If that is so, kudos to Australian law enforcement.

Joel Cauchi (40), responsible for the Mall assault, had been known to the authorities as having a mental problem but not charged for any offence. The 16-year-old boy (name not yet revealed by the police) who attacked the Bishop was, however, known to the police and was on a good behaviour bond. He had been warned and let off a few years ago after he came to adverse notice for a mentally disturbed condition and for his latent propensity for violence. Here is a dilemma for the police. While they may suspect that a particular individual is a prospective criminal because of his visible mental condition, they have no option but to release the suspect when there is no concrete evidence of actual participation in a crime.

Investigations are on in both the cases. Both happenings are viewed as the handiwork of a person acting on his own, commonly known as a 'lone wolf'. This phenomenon baffles law enforcement across nations.

A lone wolf is looked upon as a solitary individual indulging in public violence on targets he may never have met. The motive quite often goes undetected.

Some well known cruel incidents involving a lone offender include the July 2011 attack in Oslo and a nearby island where a youth summer camp was going on. Seventy-seven persons were killed in the fatal explosion engineered by a 32-year-old Norwegian with known right-wing extremist views.

Another well known gruesome incident was in March 2019 in which one Andres Breivik attacked two mosques in Christchurch (New Zealand) killing 51 persons. What was unique here was the live streaming of the dastardly action on Facebook by the offender Brenton Tarant (28), an Australian gym trainer who had migrated to New Zealand carrying his right extremist views.

Several theories

There are several theories on the lone wolf phenomenon. The attacker very often has had a psychiatric disorder from childhood — especially at a broken home — that was developing without the knowledge of the parents. Even when the parents are aware of the disorder, many are guilty of ignoring it, either because of a fear of reputation loss, or perhaps in the hope that the child will outgrow the malady. The root cause of youth deviance is traceable often to a perceived sense of injustice. Animosity towards a political system is also not uncommon. This is a complex web where the despair of a person gets the better of hope.

There are two groups involved here; law enforcement and society at large. Police agencies are often clueless on handling a person reported to be mentally unstable and dangerous. Mere record keeping without treatment is often the starting point of a disaster such as Oslo, Christchurch or Sydney. Law enforcement will not intervene unless the suspect had indulged in violence and caused harm to fellow beings. Application of law as a measure of abundant caution, without the report of a specific harm, will often lead to charges of human rights violation. Wait and watch is, therefore, the easy way out for the authorities. But police agencies do not always have the resources to monitor individual behaviour. This is where the shoe pinches.

Schools and homes will have to play a huge role in detecting deviance among the youth under their care. Indifference on the part of either is culpable. What about the bureaucracy? There is a social welfare set-up in every government. This is more on paper than on the ground. Government agencies are either preoccupied with other relatively more visible tasks or lack the skill needed to look for and detect aberrations in teenage mental health. This is why lone wolf attacks will continue to be a menace. The problem could grow in dimensions and intensity considering the burgeoning violence and inequality in our environs.

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