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TAKE NOTE ABIDJAN, CAIRO AND TRIPOLI: western democracy has its failings too

by Philip Baum

Japan; Libya; New Zealand; Côte d'Ivoire; Egypt; Bahrain; Yemen; Australia; Tunisia; Syria; and Myanmar. Political uprisings and environmental disasters on unimaginable scales, resulting in the loss of tens of thousands of lives, are challenging news editors as to where they should be focussing their reporting efforts. Saudi Arabian troops entering Bahrain would have been the headlines a few months ago; now it barely makes the front page. 2011 may only be three months old but the gravity of the stories we are witnessing is fuelling the Nostradamus-followers' concerns that the end is nigh...

Recent events are demonstrating the best and worst of humankind. The stoicism of the Japanese public in the face of both radioactive pollution and the loss of their loved ones, homes and possessions from the impact of the tsunami is quite remarkable; the numerous international disaster relief teams arriving in Christchurch in the aftermath of the earthquake is a tribute to the global village concept; and those little individual acts of heroism, such as the teenager who saved his younger brother and mother from the Queensland floods only to die himself, are heart-wrenching.

On the other side of the coin, the bloodshed being spilled across Côte d'Ivoire as Laurent Gbagbo defiantly disregards the internationally recognised outcome of the general election clearly demonstrates that simply having elections is a far cry from ensuring democracy. Meanwhile, the world waits to see what type of government Egypt will elect in the post-Mubarak era and how much religious doctrine will impact upon the campaign in the country long-regarded as the leader of the Arab world. And, whilst Silvio Berlusconi's alleged sexual antics have already made Italy the laughing stock of the world, he is yet another example of the thirst an individual has to remain in control and the unadulterated power of ego.

The demise of brutal regimes is to be applauded; along with their passing comes the realisation as to the extent we had been blinded from the extent of their crimes, Egypt being a classic example. Furthermore, the hypocrisy of politicians around the globe is clearly exposed, as evidenced by the now blood-curdling images of the likes of Blair, Obama, Sarkozy and Berlusconi warmly greeting Qaddafi at a variety of forums, despite the fact that the State he leads is regarded as being responsible for the bombings of both Pan Am flight 103 and UTA flight 772. Money talks; that is the nature of politics.

The democratisation of the Middle East is not necessarily a good omen for the security services. There is always the potential for extremist minorities, particularly those with a religious bent and opposed to western values, feeling alienated by the consultative approach that democracy imbues and are almost forced into committing atrocities so their voices can be heard; every major step forward in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process seems to be accompanied by a terrorist attack by those who espouse a "no compromise" viewpoint.

The Europeans and Americans like to believe that they are the purveyors of wholesome politics, with governments that truly reflect the multi-cultural, pan-religious, classless electorates who exercise their democratic rights at the ballot box. Yet one could argue that we have overly empowered the 'man on the street' and this can have a negative result when it comes to security.

"...employers are more frightened of being charged with unfair dismissal than they are of an al-Qaeda attack..."

Across Europe, the power of the trade union movement has resulted in screening companies being unable to implement effective quality control programmes and punish personnel guilty of poor performance in a timely manner. An effective security machine is dependent upon it operating in a disciplined environment where there is no room for excuses. In the ideal world, a failed drill should result in re-training and a second failure in dismissal; in the real world, screeners are afforded chance after chance as employers are more frightened of being charged with unfair dismissal than they are of an al-Qaeda attack.

And that's if one can even do a drill! I once asked an airline how often they planted dummy devices in the cabin to test their aircrews pre-flight search procedures; the response was that there was no way that the unions would allow cabin crew to be tested in this way, so it was not done and that, I'm afraid, is the industry norm.

The body scanner and profiling debate, fuelled by the media's scaremongering tactics, has been hijacked by civil liberty groups (especially in the USA) who don't appreciate that security, by nature, is not fair and that the only reasonable way to ensure our (and their) safety on board aircraft is to use a healthy blend of common sense and advanced technology. I still can't fathom out just how the political correctness issue has been allowed to prevent effective pre-flight security controls from being deployed when they are in regular use by customs and immigration agencies.

Meanwhile, our judicial systems are often so hell-bent on applying the letter rather than the spirit of the law – which is, presumably, to safeguard society – that unpalatable court decisions are reached. In the UK, there have been incidents of preachers of hate not being deported because it would impinge upon their human rights and the fate they may face overseas. Take for example Nezar Hindawi, sentenced to 45 years in 1986 for his role in the attempted bombing of an El Al flight; the High Court has just ruled that he should be considered for parole despite the attempts of government ministers to prevent that happening. In some countries he would have been executed.

So, whilst we may embrace democratic principles, in an uncertain world, where the stakes are so high, we have to develop a more regimented response. Perhaps that is why the examples of aviation security screening best practice are not in Europe or America, but in Asia? One only has to visit the likes of Hong Kong and Singapore as a passenger to appreciate the disciplined and professional environment in which they operate. Freedom is not free. ■

