

Let us Not be Diverted From Our Great Cause

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I am writing this commentary in the wake of the horrific terrorist attacks that occurred in Paris on 13 November 2015, in which, at the last count, at least 130 people were murdered and many more severely injured.

We have all been deeply shocked by these events, and our deepest sympathies go to the victims and their families. Religious extremism of the terrorist group calling itself Islamic State (ISIS) has brought to our doorstep in central Europe the indiscriminate slaughter and measureless grief which are already a tragic reality for many Asian, Middle-Eastern and African countries.

Some observers draw parallels between the Paris massacres and the horrifying 2008 Taj Mahal Hotel attack in Mumbai, in which 164 were slain. According to Bruce Riedel of the Brookings Institution, “Mumbai has been studied by both terrorists and counter-terrorists because it set a gold standard for how a small group of suicidal fanatics can paralyze a major city, attract global attention, and terrorize a continent.”¹

For France, this is already the third terrorist incident following the Charlie Hebdo/Jewish supermarket and Thalys train attacks of 2015. And now Bamako, Lebanon and Port El Kantaoui in Tunisia, and who knows what might follow ... This fresh wave of assaults is the culmination of an extensive series of suicide bombings, shootings, downings of aircraft and hostage-takings that have been perpetrated ever since 9/11. I must confess that I have lost count of the plethora of atrocities committed by al-Qaeda, Islamic State, Boko Haram and the numerous offshoots of these terrorist groupings in recent times. Wikipedia lists 298 individual attacks from 1 January to 20 November 2015 alone.

2014 saw the highest death toll from terrorism ever: 32,658 people lost their lives, an 80% increase from 2013, according to the 2015 Global Terrorism Index.² A mere five countries – Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan and Syria – account for 78%

of all these deaths. Violence and displacement have caused a huge upsurge of hungry and malnourished people in these parts of the world. Two thirds of all stunted children – 112 million – live in conflict-torn areas, where rates of child stunting have also been decreasing more slowly than elsewhere in the world, according to the 2014–15 IFPRI Global Food Policy Report.³

Yet even as I record these appalling statistics, let me not forget all the truck drivers and other committed personnel working for the WFP, UNHCR, UNICEF and countless NGOs who risk life and limb by providing food assistance and other services to innocent people who have been forced to flee their homes by terrorism and violence. These courageous individuals are continuing with their efforts undeterred, and they set an example to us all.

The relationship between deprivation and violence is a complex and intimate one, both timeless and topical. Writing in 2013, Joachim von Braun (Director of the Center for Development Research [ZEF] and Professor for Economic and Technological Change at the University of Bonn, Germany) observed: “Dramatic increases – or ‘spikes’ – in the cost of commodity foods have not only impoverished the diet and constrained the possibilities of many of the world’s poorest and most vulnerable populations; they have in some instances actually led to food riots which have triggered major political and societal changes. The ‘Arab Spring’ that commenced on 18 December 2010 had complex causes, but food prices did play some role in triggering the violent change.”⁴

Just two years later, and shortly before I commenced work on this commentary, Richard Horton, Editor-in-Chief of *The Lancet*, observed: “If the 20th century was the Age of War, what is the 21st century? It is the Age of Fear. As our French neighbors mourn their dead,” Horton continues, “and as our human family sees civilizations destroyed, from Syria to Somalia, we know that terrorism is designed with one objective only – to trigger epidemics of fear.”⁵ In a brave and stirring editorial, Horton points out the irony that, despite these many horrors, “the dominant discourse in global health today, as summed up in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is unremittingly utopian.”



This issue of *Sight and Life* is dedicated to the SDGs, which were launched at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit held in New York in September of 2015. In the face of the terrible events of recent months, we might well be tempted to give in to fear; and in a state of fear, it is hard to devote one's attention to the diligent implementation of carefully elaborated policies and programs, howsoever well-intentioned these might be. We may even have to accept terror and violence as the new normal and work around it.

Yet implementing the SDGs is precisely what the nutrition community needs to do at the moment. However many factors may be influencing the current global wave of terror – from social inequity at one end of the scale to group blood lust at the other – we know that poor nutrition creates fragile societies. And we know that fragile societies can easily fragment into broken states, and that broken states provide the ideal breeding-ground for terrorists – people whose worldview is as borderless as it is nihilistic.

Our day-to-day work as nutritionists will not disable any Kalashnikovs or defuse any suicide belts; it will not uncover any terrorist plans in the making and foil them before they can be put into practice. But it can, little by little and bit by bit, help to eliminate some of the conditions which encourage people to pick up Kalashnikovs and strap on suicide belts.

In a recent budget review, the British government announced that at least half the UK's £12bn (US\$ 18bn) aid budget will be spent on supporting fragile and failing states. In the circumstances, one can comprehend the swiftness and decisiveness of this move. If it sets a trend, however, then development budgets worldwide may undergo radical transformation, and this change may make it far harder for us to do our essential work in many parts of the world. Horrific as the recent terrorist attacks have been, we must not allow them to destabilize our work of improving the nutritional status of all populations in need, wherever they might be in the world.

Equitable, just and stable societies are those in which everyone *has enough of the right kind of food* to eat – societies in which the most essential ingredients for peace are education and healthcare for all. As we mourn the victims of the Paris massacres, and the victims of all terrorist atrocities of the 21st century, let us remember that – just like those brave truck drivers who selflessly bring food to those who most urgently need it – we have an important job to do, and that we are building a more peaceful world with every day's work. Let us as the nutrition community stay on course and not be diverted from our purpose. We have a great cause. We must never allow the threat of terror to weaken our resolve to fight for a world free from malnutrition.

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