

A Shopping Experience!

Now, a week later, whenever a door slams or someone hits a mat against a wall, I jump ... thinking: gunshot! Forty or fifty times a day ... or more ... I think about my 'shopping experience' at The Westgate Mall, in Nairobi, Kenya. I wonder when these startled jumps and crazy thoughts will go away. Time heals all they say.

Two loud cracks from a gun ... perhaps ten or twenty metres away. I was crouched behind a small counter, trying to shout into my mobile phone.

"I'm in Nakumatt, Westgate, and there's gunfire all around!"

Another ear-shattering bang! I ditched the phone idea and started to run; bent over, head down, aiming towards the rear of the store. Other people, looking bewildered, were running alongside me.

I had entered the Westgate basement car park at 11.44 a.m. (I knew the exact time: it was stamped on the card, later found in the shirt pocket I had worn on that fateful morning). I smiled at the uniformed male guard, as he frisked me with his metal detector, thinking *"What a useless exercise"* then strolled up the ramp to the ground floor, surrounded by artificial rocks and waterfalls, suspended light balls and piped music: all part of the universal, shopping experience: it could have been Dubai.

Reaching the ground floor, I checked my watch and made the decision not to go immediately to Art Caffe for lunch, but to do some shopping first at the Nakumatt Supermarket. I spent a few minutes in a phone shop just nearby, then entered the supermarket just a few minutes before noon, stopping at the phone counter inside the main door, but not finding exactly what I wanted, proceeding to the rear of the store, to buy some household items.

I was in the hardware section and scanning the shelves when the lights first went down. It must have been 12 o'clock. I didn't think too much about this because power failure occurs quite regularly in Nairobi and in a large complex like Westgate you just wait for the generator to kick in, then business resumes, as usual. This time, as expected, the lights came back fairly quickly, but then after another few minutes everything went dark again. I recall asking one of the staff "*What's up with the lighting?*" and his mumbled reply about faulty generators. After some time, probably about five minutes, the lights came on again and I grabbed a couple of items and put them in my basket, deciding then to go up to the first floor to look for a new backpack.

On the upper floor I remained for perhaps another five minutes, in the far back corner of the store. After checking out the packs, but then deciding they were all a bit expensive, I began to make my way back to the escalator and ground-floor checkout. Walking towards the front of the supermarket, I remember being confronted by 15 or 20 young people, who came dashing up the escalator, some bumping into me, as they ran to the back. At first, I thought it was some school exercise, or maybe a youth group going to buy bags for an overseas trip, but as I rode down the escalator I looked back and saw a number of youngsters crouched down and peering through the glass banister, looking towards the store's ground floor entrance.

At ground level, I started to notice that people around me looked a bit confused. "*What's going on?*" I asked a staff member next to me. Then I heard the gunshots!

I moved quickly, to reach the sanctuary of a glass counter, though if at that time I had known what was actually happening, I would have realized my hiding place was, to put it mildly, slightly inadequate. At this point, as described earlier, I phoned home, managing to utter a few words of alarm, still thinking it was a robbery that was taking place. Then, the noise from guns and grenades became louder.

It was at that point that the gravity of the situation began to dawn and I started to run, in earnest, past the meats and delicatessen counter and on towards the cold store for

milk. As I ran, I sensed many scared and confused people, running alongside me. A couple of staff were beckoning customers to an escape route – normally the entrance for goods coming from the basement store. Once we reached what seemed to be the sanctuary of the passageway beyond the doorway, the running slowed to a jog, then a fast walking pace, along the corridor and down a flight of steps into the store below.

As I arrived – a newcomer to the deliveries area – I could see others already embedded between and behind bags of flour and sugar, and other trench-like items. I helped one Indian family with kids – the two adults were in total panic – to construct a protective screen of bags around themselves, then retreated to watch from behind my own ramparts, inwardly just as scared, but trying desperately not to show it. I was beginning to appreciate what it must have been like, fighting trench warfare in World War 1!

We stayed there for thirty or forty minutes; perhaps fifty people – it was hard to tell when they were all hiding behind their self-made barricades – totally scared and glancing at each other while hearing repetitive rapid-fire gun noises coming from the stairwell and the floor above. At times there would be a lull in the crackle of guns and people would move towards the large truck-delivery doorway, and freedom that beckoned from a road to the side of the mall. But then the frightful rat-tat-tat sounds would resume and we would all scurry back to our bunkers.

But thankfully the time did come when everything did go quiet for a longer period. Then we were given the instructions by staff that everyone was waiting to hear: *“Move, move! ...run, run! ... get out! ...quickly, quickly!!”* That’s when I came to know the Kiswahili word for hurry: ‘Haraka! Haraka!’ ... Hurry! Hurry! And so we all ran: crouched over, three or four abreast; mothers carrying their young ones screaming, down the side of the main building and across the road to the sanctuary of a small treed area, perhaps 100 metres away from the mall. Safety at last!

On looking back to that fateful day, which will forever be etched in the minds of all who were there, I wonder why I was so slow to realise that something quite terrible was happening. Perhaps if I was a bit younger, I would have heard the guns and grenade sounds a minute or so earlier. But then, who would expect to be in the middle of one of the world's worst ever terrorist attacks, whilst 'enjoying' their routine, weekend shopping experience. Who, on Earth, could expect that?

Well in fact, I discovered later that many other Nairobians did in fact expect such a thing to happen. The building was owned by Israelies and frequented by the rich and famous, especially white expats and Indians. When this is coupled with the fact that Al-Shabaab - the Somali-based terrorist organization which carried out the attack – were known to have said many times they would launch an assault on Nairobi soil, it becomes something of a *fait accompli* for the attack to happen. What more of a potion does one need? One Indian friend later told me that he would never go there and warned his wife against meeting her colleagues there. There were even rumours of prominent people being told to leave the vicinity on the morning of the assault. Thus, it appeared, after the event, that much of this was common knowledge (for some) for as long as two years before the attack ... and maybe even longer!

The next question is obvious. If so much knowledge was out there in the common arena, why was the attack allowed to happen? It seemed the terrorists rented a shop inside the building, for several months, so that they could plan the assault in the finest detail. They arrived at the front entrance, car loaded with powerful weapons, which were handed out like raffle tickets, before they turned to mow down the shoppers, as they came laden with bags, down the front steps. And all they had to beat were plastic metal detectors wielded by untrained guards – untrained at least for a full-blown terrorist attack! It made me angry that this was the background to a situation in which I almost lost my life.

On that fateful day – September 21st, 2013 – prior intelligence and present security was found to be sadly lacking. The attack raised some serious questions about the levels of

intelligence and security that exist in Kenya, set within a surrounding cloud of graft and corruption. The Kenya Defence Force (KDF) which was sent in to replace the trained anti-terrorist RECCE squad, were seen later, on CCTV, carrying out plastic bags full of looted goods. What was particularly alarming for me was that the basement area, where I and others had sought refuge, was later used by the four Al-Shabaab gunmen, for relaxation and prayer, after their day of killing! This was also shown on CCTV, so I asked myself: *“If people knew about the store as an escape route, why did they not apprehend the killers, when they were there?”* It eventuated that they walked out of the mall and merged into the crowd ... free to carry out their next deadly deed! I also wandered away from the site, then turned up the next day at a nearby ‘Operations Base’ to give my story. Nobody was interested.

Though it’s now a long time since the Westgate massacre took place, there are still some images that linger in my mind. Of the radio broadcast which told the story of the carnage that took place on the rooftop, where children were enjoying a fun, cooking competition, when they were mown down like bowling pins and the radio presenter, shot in the legs, who bled to death. A lady told a story of trying to protect a pile of young bodies, not knowing who was dead, or who was alive. Then there was my own personal horror: A photo posted on Facebook, of a pile of dead bodies, lying in front of the meat counter in Nakumatt – the one which I had run past whilst fleeing the gunshots! I wondered, if I had delayed by minutes, or even seconds, might I myself have then been one of those bloody corpses? I wondered also, if I had not delayed for a few minutes, by going upstairs to look at the backpacks on show, could I have been one of the people who were slaughtered along with the cashiers, at the checkout?

Luck of the draw, they say. Others tell me, my time is not yet up. But what about those kids on the rooftop? Did their time deserve to be up? I was very lucky ... by minutes, or seconds. Many of course were not. And for those who were injured, or trapped, or held hostage, not being able to escape; their experiences must be so much worse than my own. I hesitate to even think about what they went through.

And of course, the bastard terrorists got exactly what they crave ... notoriety! Their jackpot prize – as for all terrorists – is to be headlines on the front page, on top of the TV ratings and spinning viral, on Facebook. Perhaps they would have preferred the numbers of dead to be in the hundreds rather than the seventies ...the larger the numbers, the higher the ratings! But generally speaking, they must have been quite pleased with their day's work. Another day's 'Shopping Experience' for them ...a truly 'Shocking Experience' for me!
