

## **Public Lives**

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### **When foreign embassies close**

There is little a country can do when foreign governments, out of fear, shut down their embassies because of serious threats to their security. The move is of the same category as the issuance of advisories against traveling to particular destinations. The host country can do two things: take action to neutralize the threat, and assure the countries concerned that their citizens will be given full protection.

The unprecedented closure of the Australian and Canadian embassies in Manila, and of the offices of the European Commission, not only paints a dismal picture of the country, but it also poses a huge dilemma for the Philippine government. The threat to these foreign missions has not been specified. Philippine officials claim that no consultation or coordination with the intelligence community and the police was undertaken prior to the shutdown. The closures were not prompted by any expression of hostility toward these embassies by any local group. They are in friendly territory. How can they be properly protected if they don't tell their host about the threats to their security?

What is clearly at issue here is the capacity of the Philippine government to ensure the safety of foreign delegations against terrorist attacks. Evidently, the diplomats of these countries do not think very highly of the Philippines' ability to prevent these attacks or mitigate their effects. This is a matter of perception, and we must look into its basis.

But it has to be said, in all fairness, that there is probably no country in the world today that can claim a perfect system for preventing these attacks. They may be launched by foreign terrorists, with or without the help of local groups. Like the Sept. 11 hijackers, terrorists enter their target country on valid visas. We are dealing here with a transnational threat that governments have not known before. The unseen enemy is not a state, but a loose network of militants, unified

more by a core of shared beliefs and sentiments than by a central command. Its targets are not the apparatuses of states, but their citizens, wherever they are, and all the markers of the detested way of life and policies they represent.

Western nations have reacted to this new vulnerability by restricting the entry into their territories of nationals from particular countries, and by issuing negative travel advisories. The closure of foreign missions in high-risk capitals around the world is a logical progression of this paranoia. It signals the emergence of a world in which nations are sealed off from one another by walls of distrust and resentment, marking a return to the parochialism of cultures that is at the heart of every fundamentalism.

The threats are probably real, and Australia and Canada cannot be blamed for taking them seriously. But why they have chosen to act independently of their host country, at the risk of breaching diplomatic norms, deserves examination.

Congressman Apolinario Lozada Jr., the chair of the House foreign affairs committee, says that foreign embassies first expressed their apprehensions to the authorities in August this year. Their fears were however dismissed by our intelligence officials as unfounded, Lozada claims. But after the bombing of a nightclub in Bali in October, which killed nearly 200 people, mostly Australians, and after the bomb attack on Israeli tourists in Kenya the other day, those fears have understandably become more real.

More than verbal assurances of safety, it is a government's objective record of arrests and conclusive investigations that carries greater weight among foreign embassies. While we locals are accustomed to stilling our fears by recourse to fatalism, our more rationalist foreign guests look for results. And results have been scarce in our country. There is hardly any investigation of a terrorist attack in the Philippines that has ended in a definite finding. What the public sees is an endless parade of suspects, who tell incoherent stories and whose participation in the conspiracy is never proven to anybody's satisfaction.

To this day, no one has told the real story behind the Dec. 30, 2000 bombing of the Light Rail Transit, or the bombing of the malls in Zamboanga City, or of the Caloocan-bound bus in Metro Manila last month. We are shown photographs of the police and the military seizing large stockpiles of materials that go into the making of powerful explosives. But the investigation of these incidents remains typically inconclusive. There are no follow-up reports, no arrests, nothing but photo opportunities.

But the biggest reason for doubting the government's capacity to stop terrorism is to be found in the handling of the Abu Sayyaf problem. After sending 7000 Filipino troops to Basilan and Sulu, and after deploying 660 fully-equipped US Special Forces to assist in the liquidation of a band consisting of no more than a hundred armed men, the Philippine government has produced nothing but the personal belongings of Abu Sabaya, the spokesman of the Abu Sayyaf. He is presumed dead, but the rest of his gang are at large and continue to pose a threat to civilian communities and travelers.

There is no country in the world today beyond the reach of terrorism. But where countries differ is in the effectiveness of their response to this menace. Instead of blaming foreign embassies for allowing themselves to be easily terrorized, we should look into our record and ask what has made our country appear unsafe to foreigners. To recognize that is to begin to understand what it takes to be a strong republic.

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