

Malls on 'higher state of alert' in wake of terrorist threats

Officials say security measures have been increased after video posted by al-Shabaab urged attacks on 'disbelievers'



By Samantha Christmann | News Staff Reporter | on March 23, 2015 - 5:44 PM

A young mother hid behind a restaurant counter, trying desperately to keep her toddler son quiet as a gunman sprayed bullets from an AK-47 nearby. A terrified little girl ran for cover across a mall corridor where dead bodies lay just steps away. Parents cradled infants and fled for their lives into the arms of waiting rescuers after being trapped for three days and hunted like prey.

The photographs taken during the 2013 terrorist attack on Nairobi's Westgate mall are harrowing. Those images were fresh in shoppers' minds last month when al-Shabaab, the terror group that claimed responsibility for that deadly act, called on sympathizers here to launch similar attacks on malls in America.

In a video released by the group, a masked man with a British accent urged militant Muslim extremists around the world to "target the disbelievers wherever they are," reminding them that "all it takes is a man with firm determination."

It's a threat malls across Western New York are taking seriously.

The day after the video surfaced, Cheektowaga police briefed its entire force about it. It met with the third-party company that provides security for the Walden Galleria and stepped up the frequency of police patrols at the mall, the region's largest.

Assistant Police Chief James J. Speyer Jr., echoing the Department of Homeland Security, said that there is "no credible threat" against malls in Western New York. Still, police have stepped up security practices that were already in place well before the threatening video was made.

"With a terrorist threat like that, there's no tip about anything specific here, so we just kind of get together, share information and try to give it a little more attention and hopefully put everybody on a higher state of alert," Speyer said.

Walden Galleria and its owner Pyramid Cos. did not respond to requests for comment, but Speyer said the police communicate with the Walden Galleria every day and practiced an active-shooter drill there last summer.

Eastern Hills, FBI are ready

Eastern Hills Mall in Clarence, which employs its own security force, has added two officers to its staff since the threat was made and works with state troopers and Erie County Sheriff deputies who regularly patrol the mall. Security director Harold Perry, a former trooper and government security employee, met with sheriffs, homeland security and the FBI early this month to coordinate active-shooter drills at the mall. Eastern Hills is also under constant video surveillance, monitored and recorded around the clock. It is in the process of adding more cameras and is replacing older ones with more advanced equipment. Security also inspects some trucks and deliveries.

"People think that if they hit Eastern Hills we won't have the same security presence as in a larger shopping environment," said Russell Fulton, the mall's general manager. "Wrong. We, as a smaller mall, are able to work more closely with our anchors and mall shops."

That preparation came in handy last June, when Fulton put the mall on lockdown after police alerted him to reports of an armed man loose nearby.

The FBI is also in close contact with local law enforcement and first responders to ensure they are prepared to "thwart, disrupt or respond to threats of violence," according to Brian P. Boetig, special agent in charge at the FBI's Buffalo division.

"I am confident that our collective preparation will pay dividends in the event a threat materializes in our area," Boetig said.

Western New York is far better equipped to deal with an attack than Nairobi law enforcement was when it faced the September 2013 attack, experts said. The response there was so bungled by incompetence

and infighting among Kenyan agencies that the crisis, which resulted in 67 deaths and 175 injuries, stretched on for three days.

Western New York has more resources, the agencies are streamlined, with better communication systems in place, more sophisticated contingency plans and law enforcement responders have far superior training, according to H. Raghav Rao, professor of management science and systems at the University at Buffalo School of Management.

Looking specifically at Western New York, he said the region's experience in dealing with natural hazards goes a long way toward preparing it for a terrorist attack.

"A lot of it would carry over," he said. "You would have a lack of resources and you'd have to coordinate amongst the different emergency agencies."

A lot of those systems have been tested and improved over time, most recently during the November storm, he said.

"Emergency response personnel got together and had a command center set up before it even happened," Rao said.

Soft targets

Still, malls are especially soft targets, he said, and pose unique challenges.

Unlike an airport or sporting event, there are no metal detectors or pat-downs. And unlike a government building that can be locked down easily, malls have cavernous open spaces with many points of entry.

Much of what can be done to deter an attack is the same protocol malls already use to discourage shoplifting: make a strong show of the security presence and keep a close watch for suspicious activity. But many of the suspicious behaviors security personnel look for when screening for terrorist activity – people with large packages, groups of people traveling together, people taking pictures, vehicles idling near curbs – are common in a mall.

Malls and law enforcement make response preparation a major focus of their anti-terrorism efforts. Security staff analyze each mall's particulars and identify its weakest points in order to deploy more resources there in a crisis. Food courts are earmarked for extra attention: people seated in close quarters in such a densely populated, central location makes food courts especially vulnerable.

Drills and training are key. Simulation and tabletop exercises help first responders hone plans, practice strategies, improve communication and shave precious moments off response time. Responders learn how to act in a situation where they know a shooter is present, but aren't sure of his location.

"The more exercises they can be put through, the better," Rao said. "It's spur-of-the-moment thinking and in such times, panic often takes over."

Communication is vital – not just among responding agencies but in getting word out to the general public that they should stay away from the scene. Malls got to test their social networks over the winter when heavy snow caused them to close down operations.

Evacuation techniques are just as important. There is a science to getting bystanders out quickly and to making sure attackers don't get away. In Nairobi, several of the shooters involved in the mall attack posed as civilians and were allowed to leave, evading capture.

Very safe

For their part, consumers are urged to be aware of their surroundings and always have an idea where the closest exits are. Perhaps most importantly, though, American shoppers should understand how abundantly safe they really are. Even including the tragic Sept. 11 attacks, less than a thousandth of 1 percent of Americans have died in a terrorist attack.

In fact, FBI officials called the Al-Shabaab threat "propaganda" and insist American malls are safe. The Pentagon also said last week that the mastermind behind the Westgate attack, Adan Garar, was killed in a recent drone strike. It has also said that Al-Shabaab has very little influence outside Somalia.

The widest-reaching effect Al-Shabaab can have on Western New Yorkers has already taken place, according to Daniel Antonius, assistant professor at UB and co-author of "The Political Psychology of Terrorism Fears."

"With terror attacks, the main purpose is the terror – to instill fear," he said. "It's not even about the deaths and killing people, though that certainly is a goal as well. With unspecific threats, you never know when the next attack will happen and that creates an underlying fear."

Terrorists hope that intangible fear will spill over into real financial consequences, keeping shoppers from visiting malls and spending money there, but that hasn't borne out, he said.

email: schristmann@buffnews.com