

Bomb blast victims wait for justice, 23 years later

Peter Muiruri : 4-6 minutes : 8/7/2022



Rosemary Wanjiru was two-years-old and could hardly comprehend the unfolding events after the bomb blast. [Elvis Ogina, Standard]

To Rosemary Wanjiru and her late mother, August 7, 1998, was just another day in their lives. There was nothing unusual as the two left their Ongata Rongai home for Gikomba market where Wanjiru's mother operated a business.

As the bus they were travelling in approached the Haile Selassie-Moi Avenue junction, there was an explosion. It was a **bomb blast** at the nearby American embassy. Wanjiru was two-years-old and could hardly comprehend the unfolding events. With injuries on her face, she clung to her equally injured mother as rescue work got underway.

Today, Wanjiru, 24, is a mother of a four-year-old and expecting her second born. Her only memories of the dark day remain what was related to her by her mother. And after 23 years, she is among thousands of Kenyans who continue to bear the scars inflicted by the Al Qaeda-affiliated terrorists.

“My life and that of my mother changed forever,” Wanjiru says. “My mother lived with complications till her death in 2006 while I was in Standard Four. Her chest was never the same after breathing in toxic fumes. I have been under the care of my grandmother since.”

The terrorists' target was the US embassy but the full impact of the blast was felt in adjacent buildings where hundreds of Kenyans worked. Ufundi Cooperative building was reduced to rubble while the 'bell-bottomed' Cooperative Bank House had all glass cladding stripped off.

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Erastus Mureithi, the then-Cooperative Bank MD, was seated in the boardroom near his office on the building's third-floor annex when the bomb exploded.



Former Cooperative Bank MD, Erastus Mureithi. [File, Standard]

"My secretary lost an eye. My son, who was in the office at the time, had facial injuries. Had I been at my desk, I probably would not have survived," says Mureithi.

The physical and emotional scars from Kenyans affected by the bomb blast are yet to heal. Douglas Sidialo, the spokesperson for the bomb blast victims, has knocked on almost every door, in Kenya and abroad, looking for ways to have the victims compensated to no avail.

"The US had released some money primarily to restore the affected structures. Though a small fraction went to a medical support programme, including mental health for those who needed it, this was no official compensation. The Americans simply packed their bags and left," he says.

Sidialo, who was blinded by the blast, has met some top American government officials and participated in numerous sports events to raise awareness about the suffering of the survivors. In one visit to America, Sidialo laid a wreath at the Pentagon, the US military headquarters after cycling from Ground Zero in New York with the brother of one of the pilots of the hijacked planes during the 9/11 attacks.

“I have cycled from Cairo to Cape Town in 95 days. I have joined 10,000 cyclists in Tel Aviv for similar purposes. I have climbed the tallest mountain in Africa to try and bring justice to victims. I have done what is humanly possible despite my circumstances....,” says Sidialo.

But nothing pains Sidialo more than the inaction of the US despite “lofty promises” of restitution. In 2011, Sidialo met with then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who, like others before her, promised to “leave no stone unturned” until the victims were compensated.



Douglas Sidialo was blinded in the 1998 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi. [AP Photo]

“I shook hands with Joe Biden during his visit to Kenya as US vice president. He told me, “We Americans believe in human rights.” Now he is the president but so far nothing has happened,” he says.

In May 2021, the victims, through Kituo cha Sheria, filed a petition at the Constitutional and Human Rights Division of the High Court in which they wanted the government compelled to admit liability in the terror attack. The State is yet to respond. Mention will be on September 26.

Meantime, Wanjiru will continue to walk with a slight limp, gaze at her scars in a mirror and take care of her young family with little help. “We shall wait,” she says.

