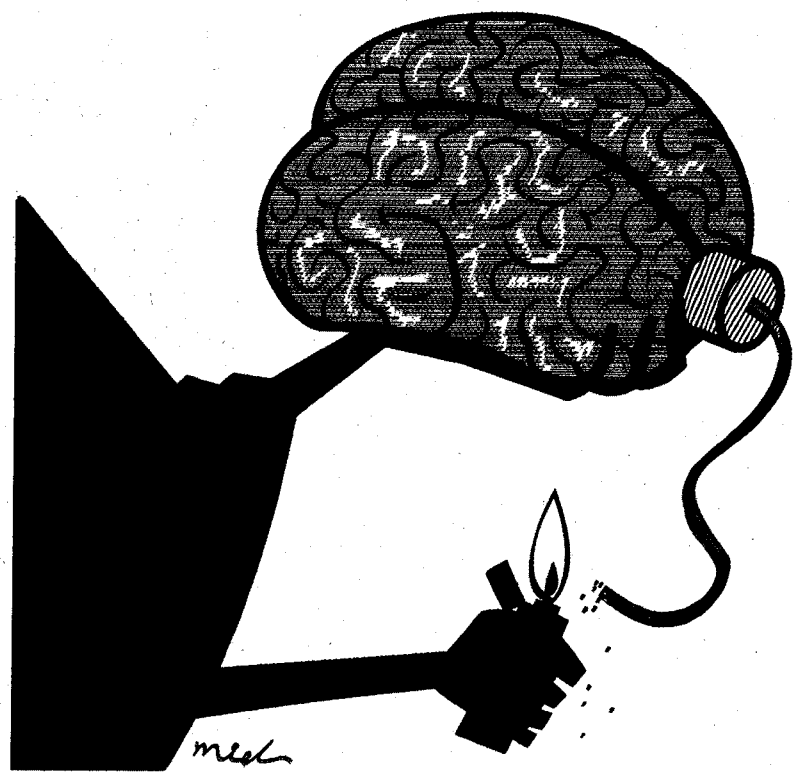




# The threat of terrorism: Between perception and reality

Organisations, like people, are vulnerable to attacks. Conducting regular risk assessments is one of the ways to prepare for possible hits to your business



FILE ILLUSTRATION

SINCE the Sept 11, 2001 attack in the United States, hardly a day goes by without a media reference to terrorist activities around the world.

Each new attack or threat, such as the recently foiled attempt on airplanes in Britain, is met with a mix of dismay and resignation as just another grim reminder of the new reality we now have to live with. This compels us to try to understand this unwelcome phenomenon in order to carry on with our lives.

## How real is the threat of terrorism?

If we focus on the hard facts and figures, the risk to each of us of being killed in a terrorist attack in Singapore is much lower than that of dying from common threats such as diseases or car accidents.

But this argument should not induce complacency among people and government agencies because acts of terrorism have the potential to do great harm to

people, businesses and economies, especially when caught unprepared.

Terrorist groups will sometimes strike against the economy and key infrastructures in the belief that these represent a government's weak and sensitive points (for example, the Madrid train network and London subway bombings).

A company that is associated with a specific "enemy" country, as in the case of the bombing of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank Corporation in Istanbul in 2003, also faces a real threat.

Similarly, a country that is seen as an ally of "enemy countries" by terrorists may also be at risk. In this regard, Singapore is undeniably a potential target for terrorist attacks.

Besides the direct economic impact, we must also consider the damaging psychological impact of a terrorist attack on people and their behaviours.

While experts analyse risks based on calculations of probability and impact, the wider public evaluates risk based on more qualitative factors. It derives its perception of terrorism not through direct personal experience, but essentially via the media. People are so aware and concerned about the threat of terrorism probably because it is the biggest media and political issue of the day.

Terrorism also appears so frightening because most people feel there is little an individual person or business can do about it. This feeling of lack of control can leave them feeling helpless or push them to look for direction and protection.

## How to protect yourself, your family and your organisation?

The management of terrorism risks rests primarily with governments. However, people can protect themselves by:

- increasing personal awareness about the risk of terrorist attacks through learning more about government warning and emergency systems put in place to alert and protect the public;
- steering clear of dangerous countries or areas within those countries;
- being more alert about your surroundings and people and learning how to identify suspicious objects or activities;

- taking responsibility to proactively report suspicious objects or persons lurking around a specific location; and
- being trained and prepared to effectively follow emergency procedures in case of bomb threats or an actual attack.

It is vital that the government provides guidance and information, and works on planning and communicating to improve the readiness and resilience of the civil society.

Organisations can also better manage the terrorism risk by clearly integrating it into their Risk Management and Business Continuity Management programmes. They should take security measures specific to the risks they are exposed to. In this way, they will be able to plan carefully and conduct risk assessment of the threats and evaluate their likely impact on business operations.

Organisations should also undertake security reviews of offices and worksites, as well as conduct background checks on employees and train them on emergency procedures to build their resilience.

Finally, it is essential for an organisation to build the trust of its employees and stakeholders. Without trust, any information from that organisation regarding levels of safety, disaster scenarios, or crisis evacuation procedures will likely be discounted, much to everyone's detriment.

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