

Balancing national and individual interests

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TWO months ago, 23 South Korean Christian volunteers ostensibly delivering humanitarian aid were captured by the Taleban in Afghanistan. Six agonising weeks later, 21 were finally released, with two male hostages killed early in the crisis.

During the crisis, South Koreans appealed not only to their government but also to the United States government to weigh in with the Afghan government for the hostages' release. Yet there were other citizens who criticised the hostages and the church for sending the 23 people out and showing disregard for a government prohibition against travel to that and other troubled spots in the world.

The Afghan government publicly maintained its stance of non-negotiation with the hostage-takers. The international community was unhappy that the Seoul government had legitimised the position of the Taleban by negotiating directly with them.

In the end, in responding to differing accounts on whether a ransom of US\$20 million (S\$30 million) had been paid, its spokesman said it had faced a tough balance between international norms and the duty to save its citizens. But it did say it was demanding compensation from the church for expenses incurred in the release.

Meanwhile, South Koreans remain polarised by the issue.

There are at least 143,000 Singaporeans abroad, based on 2005 official statistics, and this number can only have risen since. More Singaporeans are also exploring business opportunities in the Middle East.

Alongside this economic impetus is the diplomatic outreach - to project the image and understanding that Singapore cares to help with the development of emerging economies in our region, as well as the Middle East.

The latter is especially important in the context of what is perhaps not so usefully coined a 'civilisational war' post-Sept 11. Singapore contributes where it can to the betterment of people's lives and the bridging of cultures. Initiating and hosting the Asia-Middle East Dialogue in June 2005 was an important gesture in that regard. As citizens, we only hope that we will not be viewed with hostility by any of the parties in this 'civilisational war'. We cannot afford it.

However, we should consider the possibility that Singapore and Singaporeans might be caught in the middle of this conflict. What if Singaporeans are taken hostage overseas?

There may be those who think we must be of little strategic value to any side of this game. But we could also argue that the Taleban and other protagonists in the terror threat are playing a war of attrition, just as they had targeted the Koreans, who are identified as Christian and close Asian allies of the US. The Taleban's cause is to erode the political will of the targeted government and people in this fight.

After all, the government reminds us that it is not 'whether' but 'when' we will face a terrorist attack in our homeland. The difference with this scenario is that the attack on us might fall outside our territory.

With the experience of at least two major hostage-taking crises in our history - the 'Laju' hijacking in 1974, where President SR Nathan was a key negotiator, and the 1991 SQ 117 incident where four hostage-takers were killed and passengers were safely released - our security agencies are probably well-trained to deal with such problems should they arise here.

As a result of the SQ117 incident, the public today probably believes this government will have a 'take no prisoners' stance in any such situations. Potential hostage-takers should be deterred by the government stance, but they may try to count on public pressure to shift this stance.

The chief criticism of the international community against the Seoul government in the hostage crisis is that it has given in to the demands of the Taleban, thus emboldening it.

The Taleban's triumphalist declaration that it has the resources to take even more hostages and mount more attacks mocks the perceived lack of political will on the part of foreign governments.

The test for us, of course, is when the first body-bag arrives home.

The human story of families and friends of hostages will be wrought with angst and this will have a legitimate place in the media, but what sort of political pressure will they and the broader civil society place on the government to yield? Will the families that the government will no doubt be in direct contact with say 'yes' to mediation and 'no' to negotiation?

Will we be able to stop at the point of condemning the hostage-takers and trust the government to take the right steps behind the scenes and to see how best to align world security norms with our national interests and yet fulfil its duty to protect its citizens?

Will citizens be calling for some outside power to intervene on our behalf? With local and overseas media primed to pick up all the reactions here, and citizens - perhaps even family members directly affected - writing on the Internet, it will be difficult to control the message we send to the world and the protagonists.

These families and friends will also need a network of support from those close to them and the Singapore community at large. The Community Engagement Programme was established to play this role. We should consider how it might work in a hostage scenario and decide in our minds how best to stay resilient. To that end, it may be important to get some indication how government leaders might respond, using case studies and role-playing based on crises faced by other countries tailored to our local conditions.

There can never be one reaction to such a crisis, but it is the signature tone that will be important. The government may try to set that tone but the foreign media and the Internet will check if it rings true among the people. As such, it may also be useful to take soundings now on how ordinary Singaporeans might respond. While this will be imperfect, it could reduce the level of uncertainty we will have to deal at such a time.

These issues are not just local problems. In a post-Sept 11 world that has globalised the problem of terror, it will take the Koreans,

as much as individual citizens and governments of other countries, including ours, to make sure that as we respond, we do not win the battle only to lose the war.

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