

Nairobi Church Stands Strong After Grenade Kills Child

“Every week we wondered ‘What if it’s this week?’ Yet every week we turned up for church.”

Speaking to Open Doors News just after her Oct. 9 return from the funeral of 9-year-old John Ian Maina, Nairobi Sunday School teacher Sally Gatei was in reflective mood.

“I told the team I didn’t need counseling, but I’d not been back to the building for a few days, since it happened,” Maina says. “When I did go back to the church, my heart was pounding. You think ‘You’re alright, you’re strong,’ but I am going to get some counselling now.”

Gatei was in the room when a grenade exploded at about 10:30 a.m. on Sept. 30 at St. Polycarp, of the Anglican Church of Kenya, on the Juja Road in Nairobi. The explosion killed the boy and injured eight other children. Sally’s own son had been in there, too, only three minutes before.

“The most amazing thing, though, is that, although we thought we should cancel Sunday school the next Sunday, most children insisted we should meet as usual, even though the room had not yet been repaired!”

This attack came shortly after a Somali member of Al Shabaab had been sentenced to 59 years in prison after he confessed in court to planning attacks on Parliament. At his arrest, together with a second man, the two had, according to the police, confessed to have targeted four Nairobi churches. These were the PCEA St. Andrews Church, St Paul’s University Chapel, CITAM in Valley Road and the Holy Family Basilica Church. Had these men been successful, these attacks could

have been devastating: the four churches have an estimated 20,000-plus attendees, plus thousands of children attending Sunday Schools.

The police said they still sought eight accomplices to the two men's planned attack, after seizing suicide vests, explosive devices, and large quantities of guns and bullets. The two men had been arrested Sept. 19.

"We are in Eastleigh," the area of Nairobi well-known for its largely Somali population, Gatei says. "Many Christians, including myself, thought that something might happen. Every week we'd wonder 'What if it's this Sunday?' But we'd still go to church."

An Explosive Attack

On Sept. 30, an explosive device was hurled at the Sunday-school building, blowing off the roof.

"We heard an explosion and immediately instructed the children to lie down, but they were too terrified and ran out. Many were injured in that stampede," says church usher Paul Muigai.

John's parents, Jane and Patrick Maina, himself recovering from a stroke that has left him wheelchair-bound, are struggling to come to terms with their loss. "John had celebrated his birthday only the day before. He'd asked for two cakes, one to share with friends after church on Sunday. That never happened. My son wheeled me to the church service, then left for Sunday school," laments Patrick.

"We had sat in class for just about five minutes before we heard something explode," says young Maureen Mwangi as she waited for treatment, accompanied by her mother. Her brother sustained serious injuries.

"This church has had problems for many years. There are people who have been claiming that this is their land," says Maina

Kamanda, a former member of Parliament for Juja. "I have personally been invited to a meeting aimed at resolving the conflict. I ask the court to quickly resolve the land dispute as it might be the reason for this unfortunate incident."

Six boys and one girl aged between 6 and 10 were rushed to the Kenyatta National Hospital, where two of them were taken in for immediate surgery while one was admitted to the intensive-care unit.

According to the attending doctor, "Three of them are seriously injured. One has head injuries, another has abdominal and chest injuries, one has fractures of the femur with shrapnel also embedded in various parts of the body. The other four have soft tissue injuries and have been treated and discharged."

"Children are innocent. I wish the grenade had been thrown into the adult section, at least we have served our lives!" said parent Jackline Nduku, as other shocked parents, relatives and friends gathered in the hospital.

Church leaders were quick to appeal for non-retaliation.

"This is a cruel provocation, but I appeal to Christians not to feed violence with violence, either in word or deed, because we are called to overcome evil with good," says Archbishop Wabukala of the Anglican Church of Kenya. He and Bishop Joel Waweru of the Nairobi Diocese prayed with the children admitted to the Children's Ward.

"The life of an innocent child has been taken and others have been cruelly injured and traumatised in what should be the safest of places," Wabukala says. "The sanctity of life has been heartlessly breached in a sanctified place. Such acts seem to be designed to spark civil unrest and intimidate the Christian church. In the face of such an outrage we ask, with the prophet Habakkuk, 'O Lord, how long?' and let us trust

that God in his mercy will bring justice and relief as we cry out to him.”

“This is not a religious war but is a definite indicator that we do have enemies of the Body of Christ,” added Bishop Margaret Wanjiru, a member of Parliament for Starehe.

“Out of situations like this, we get more motivation to serve God better and as a church we will not give up,” says the Rev. Steve Shisia.

Nairobi’s Provincial Commissioner, Njoroge Ndirangu, and the Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims Secretary General Sheikh Adan Wachu, also expressed their disapproval of the attack.

The BBC reports that the hand-grenade, thrown into a crowded public place, is becoming a grimly familiar tactic in Kenya. In the past six months, it has been used in bars in Mombasa, churches in Garissa near the Somali border, as well as churches and a bus station in Nairobi.

It reports that while all of these attacks have initially been blamed on Al-Shabaab: in at least some cases, however, subsequent reporting has suggested turf-wars between local gangs.

The assailants at St. Polycarp escaped on foot via a nearby path. Three men were later arrested by the police, and released after a few hours.