

San Bernardino Pastor: There's No Vision for the City

The list of challenges confronting this blue-collar Southern California enclave was already long: a devastating municipal bankruptcy, high unemployment, foreclosures, homelessness, crime—even a nagging yellow smog that often hung over the flat desert community.

Then came last week's deadly rampage by two heavily armed shooters, which took the lives of 14 people and brought the city an even less welcome distinction: site of the United States' latest "terrorist attack," according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation and its worst gun violence in three years.

"It's like kicking someone when you're down," said resident Joko Manullang.

He noted the contrast between San Bernardino and Paris, site of deadly attacks last month that mobilized an outpouring of support across the world, could not be more stark.

"When you think of Paris, you think of the Eiffel Tower ... When it's San Bernardino, it's crackheads, foreclosures," Manullang said. "There's nothing memorable here, really – except now this tragedy."

Sitting at the base of the San Bernardino mountains, this working-class community lies just 65 miles (100 km) east of Los Angeles, a pass-through point for tourists heading to ski resorts in nearby Big Bear or to the golf courses of Palm Springs.

In bankruptcy since August 2012, the city of 215,000 people

still carries the scars of an economic doldrums from which most of the nation has managed to recover.

Check-cashing stores in rundown strip malls, billboards hawking lawyers who specialize in evictions, pawnshops, chain-link fences surrounding homes with dried-up lawns—all are visible signs of the one-third of city residents living below the poverty line.

“You don’t hear a lot of positive things coming from San Bernardino, and we didn’t want this kind of publicity,” said Kenneth Wells, a Christian pastor.

But, he added, solace could be taken from the fact that the country, including President Barack Obama, was for the first time turning its attention to the city.

“That’s important to us, that San Bernardino is being spoken of all over the country,” Wells said.

At a candlelight vigil the day after the attacks, resident Anthony Quayle said he loved his city and wanted to be part of bringing it back together.

“People talk crap about San Bernardino,” Quayle said. “But there are great hearts here. There’s great love here.”

The mayor was not immediately available to comment, but City Attorney Gary Saenz said the recent shooting was bringing people together.

“Whether it’s the fight against terrorism or our city coming through bankruptcy, it has brought about the attitude that we all need to lend support, confront our hardships, and find resolutions to our city’s many problems,” Saenz said.

Still, residents have little hope that the current wave of attention may do little to allay the rampant dysfunction plaguing their area.

As corruption probes ensnared several ex-officials at the county level in recent years, the city has not been immune. Two city councilmembers were charged in 2013 in separate cases involving illegal campaign fund use, and identity theft and stalking. Both councilmen took plea deals.

A city worker who did not want to be named paused to speak as he was clearing a park of underbrush to discourage homeless encampments.

"It's hard to care about your city when you don't see your government doing anything," said the man.

Despite his work, more than a dozen tents and makeshift shelters scattered the city park under the shadow of a gleaming \$340 million courthouse, approved before the financial crisis hit.

"Discover Downtown" say signs leading to the city center, but residents say why bother—there is nothing there.

The city's mall is up for sale and empty of most stores, the convention center is closed and dining options are a smattering of Mexican taquerias or chain restaurants in strip malls.

"No one wants to bring any business here. At four o'clock, no one wants to be downtown," said pastor Wells. "There's no vision for the city."

Former resident Ernest Romero, who still lives in the area, said he had always assumed that one advantage of living in the so-called "Inland Empire" was that no one would see such a troubled place as a good target for terrorism.

"I had been thinking, 'It could happen in Paris, New York, London, but we're OK here. The last place they'd do anything,'" he said.

"Two weeks later—BAM!" {eo}

