Terrorism and Tourism

Although our hotels in the Pacific, particularly those in Hawaii, are enjoying one of the best seasons in a decade, the current news of terrorist attacks directed at travelers, transportation systems, hotels, and restaurants around the globe tells us we have to be extra vigilant, no matter where we are.

The most glaring attack occurred last week in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheik, located at the tip of the Sinai Peninsula. It was formerly a quiet fishing village, but today, with the development of hotels and casinos, it attracts tourists from all over Europe, Russia, and even neighboring Israel. On July 22, a timed explosion went off adjacent to a souvenir marketplace. Minutes later, a suicide bomber smashed a white pickup, loaded with explosives, through the glass front doors of the Ghazala Gardens Hotel and into the lobby. The explosion that followed killed and wounded many guests and hotel employees. As survivors poured out of the hotel and into the parking lot, a third explosion, planted in a bag in the lot, blew up with additional lethal results. At least 64 people are confirmed dead, but according to the Israeli daily Haaretz, hospital officials have reported a toll of 88.

Until that moment, Sharm el-Sheik had been considered a “safe” resort. Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak has a winter residence there. President Bush, Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas met there last February in an effort to advance peace. However, in October 2004, there had been bombings in and around Taba, north of Sharm, at the Hilton and two other two resorts, which killed 34 people, 11 of them vacationing Israelis, according to the Associated Press. That, and the multiple bus and subway bombings in London earlier this month, led Egyptian authorities to set up checkpoints and other security procedures in Sharm, focusing on the resort’s casinos, which they felt would be the most likely targets for terrorists. They were right about Sharm, but unfortunately, wrong about the specific targets.

Terrorist bombings of hotels, restaurants, and other sites frequented by tourists seem to be on the rise, and the attacks are hardly limited to the Middle East. Recall that three years ago, bombs destroyed two Bali nightclubs, killing over 200. Two years ago, a blast shook the Jakarta Marriott Hotel, killing at least 10 and injuring over 150. A quick search of the Internet reveals 14 other hotel bombings around the world in the past three decades – in Australia, Ethiopia, Israel, Kenya, Morocco, Pakistan, Philippines, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

Many countries and tourism organizations have released statements condemning the latest attacks in Egypt and London. The International Council of Tourism Partners said, “Those who hide behind such cowardly acts are attacking one of the most fundamental rights every human is entitled to: the freedom to travel in peace.” I sincerely hope that more organizations, governments, and religious leaders will step forward quickly and publicly condemn terrorism. Much as the civilized nations did during World War II, the world needs the courage to again unite and do what is required to put an end to terror.

Many different motives have been attributed to those behind the current rash of bombings, and we are just beginning to understand the mentality of those who resort to terror. As noted by international affairs expert, author and columnist Michael Ledeen in National Review Online, “[Terrorists] are people who find it fulfilling to kill us and destroy our society. As time passes, we will meet more and more of them. And, in the fullness of time, we will remember that Machiavelli warned us half a millennium ago that ‘man is more inclined to do evil than to do good,’ and that the primary role of statesmen and other leaders is to contain the dark forces of human nature. [As we found out with Hitler and Mussolini,
evil] cannot be ‘fixed’ by some social program or suitable energetic public-affairs strategy, or by ‘reaching out’ to our misguided comrades. It must be dominated. Otherwise it will dominate us.”

Until that day comes, everyone in the hospitality industry, no matter what job they hold, must be vigilant and prepared.