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Terrorism difficult to combat

By Louis Halasz

The opening of the second trial of Turkish assassin Mehmet Ali Agca in Rome last week focused attention again on the problem of international terrorism, against which neither the United Nations nor the most affected countries have been able to take effective action.

The infection of violent political fanaticism is quite old. In modern times, it erupted in the "Reign of Terror" during the French Revolution in 1793-1794; it led to the anarchist assassination of U.S. President William McKinley in 1901, and it sparked World War I in 1914 when Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife were killed in Sarajevo by a Serbian nationalist.

Through many other instances of terrorism, the infection has survived into the present and is today alive and thriving more than ever, particularly since some governments use, support or abet it to promote their own policies.

Consider the following current and recent instances:

□ Iranian-inspired terrorists of the Islamic Jihad (Holy War) are threatening to massacre four American and two French hostages, all kidnapped in Lebanon, unless their 17 comrades now in jail in Kuwait are released. To emphasize their point, they recently kidnapped yet another prominent American in Beirut, David Jacobsen, director of the American University Hospital, and tried to assassinate Kuwait's ruler, Sheikh Jaber el Ahmad el Sabah.

□ The same group blew up the Marine headquarters in Lebanon in October, 1983, and car-bombed the U.S. Embassy in Beirut twice, in April, 1983, and in September, 1984. In 1983 Islamic Jihad also bombed the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait; then, in December, 1984, members hijacked a Kuwaiti airliner, flew it to Tehran, murdered two American foreign service officers, then gave up to the Iranian authorities only to vanish from sight altogether.

□ Lebanese anti-terrorists, trained by the CIA, hired a hit squad to kill the spiritual leader of the Party of God, Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah. They exploded a bomb next to his headquarters in Beirut last March, killing 80 people and wounding 200, but Sheikh Fadlallah was unhurt, and triumphant.

□ Libyan "diplomats" killed a British policewoman in London last year, shooting from the window of the embassy building. Libyan-inspired Islamic fundamentalists assassinated Egyptian President Anwar el Sadat. Most recently, Libya financed and trained a terrorist in Syria to blow up the U.S. Embassy in Cairo. The plot was foiled, as was the earlier one last November to as-

assassinate prominent anti-Kadafi politician Abdel-Hamid Bakoush, a Libyan in exile in Cairo.

□ Sikh terrorists in India killed about 100 people in bombings on May 10. The FBI arrested three Sikhs in the United States who were planning to kill Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi during his American visit early this month.

□ Forty Tamil terrorists went on a rampage through the streets of the holy city of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka on May 14, killing 145 bystanders and wounding about 100.

□ IRA terrorists blew up an armored police car in Ulster near the Irish border on May 20; four constables were killed, five civilians hurt and a bus carrying handicapped children narrowly escaped destruction.

The roll call of outrage goes on and on. In El Salvador, leftists murder and kidnap mayors while the rightist death squads still kill people they dislike. In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas decimate and disperse Misquito Indians, while the "contras" study assassination manuals. In Italy, Red Brigade terrorists kidnap and kill former Prime Minister Aldo Moro. A Japanese Red Army terrorist goes with two comrades to Israel and kills Christian pilgrims from Puerto Rico in Lod airport. West German heirs to the infamous Baader-Meinhoff gang kidnap and kill industrialists and bomb U.S. military installations. Other offshoots of these demented people keep murdering diplomats in France, in Belgium and elsewhere.

The common thread to all terrorist acts — distinguishing them from the acts of guerrillas who fight the powers of the state against which they rightly or wrongly rebel — is that, invariably, innocent bystanders are involved and harmed, most often purposely. The twisted idea is to invite countermeasures by the authorities that, presumably, will make the terrorists into martyrs and thus popular with the masses, attracting volunteers.

The ultimate nightmare is that sooner or later a group of these fanatics gets hold of a nuclear device, transforming terrorism from a dangerous nuisance into a mortal threat to all mankind.

What can be done about the plague? The threat is international: The connection between geographically and politically varied groups is more and more documented, together with governmental support from countries such as Iran, Libya or Syria, and at least toleration by Soviet-bloc countries that appreciate their primarily anti-Western thrust.

This being the case, the remedy ought to be international, too.

The United Nations, which should be the

obvious agent for action, cannot be used for the purpose, at least for now. This became clear as early as the fall of 1972, when former Secretary General Kurt Waldheim, in the wake of the killing of Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists during the Munich Olympics, brought the issue before the General Assembly.

No sooner did he do so when the Arabs, suspecting pro-Israeli sentiments behind his move, rose up in arms against the proposal. They were supported by most Africans, who were afraid that any anti-terrorist legislation would crimp the style of their guerrillas battling South Africa over apartheid and Namibia. The Soviet bloc and China, eager to preserve their good Third World credentials, provided verbal support to the anti-terrorist idea, but in the crucial votes sided with the majority, side-tracking any decisive action.

As a result, then and since, the General Assembly has adopted resolutions condemning "state terrorism" — which in their third-world dictionary means South Africa, Israel and the United States — but stayed mute about the real terrorists. Western countries, the main objects of actual terrorism, are so discouraged that by now they do not even vote against these drafts, preferring to abstain to show their disdain. Last December, yet another of these resolutions was passed, by a vote of 117-0, with 30 abstentions.

With the United Nations out of the picture, the question is what the affected countries can do on their own. Israeli U.N. Ambassador Benjamin Netanyahu, brother of the commander who died in the successful Entebbe operation, is writing a book on how to combat terrorism through concerted action by afflicted nations. His thinking is three-pronged.

In diplomacy, he wants the embassies of countries that are found providing help to terrorists closed down. In economic action, he calls on governments not to buy products, primarily oil, from countries that finance terrorism. Finally, he calls for specific military cooperation against terrorists when such a move is feasible, as it was at Entebbe.

His ideas are not likely to turn out to be more successful than were Mr. Waldheim's efforts 13 years ago. Mr. Netanyahu has just had his principles contradicted by his own government, which freed 1,155 convicted terrorists for the freedom of three Israeli POWs, thus proving the efficacy of terrorism in taking hostages to protect its own disciples when caught bloody-handed.

Incidentally, the Israeli action leaves the U.S. State Department and Secretary George P. Shultz high and dry, too. The longstanding American policy never to negotiate with terrorists has been reasserted in the painful case of the Americans virtually under terrorist death sentence in the Middle East. With

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even the Israelis yielding to terrorist blackmail, how could Washington hold out in the face of the desperation of the families of the hostages?

And what about the repeated threat of military retaliation against Iran if the hostages are harmed? What if the Islamic fanatics call Mr. Shultz's bluff — if indeed it is a bluff — and kill the hostages just as the two Americans were murdered on the tarmac of the Tehran airport? What kind of military action would cool the ardor of the extremists who have proven themselves ready to be sacrificed at the drop of a mullah's turban? And if the threat proves empty, would that not be an open invitation to further acts of terror against Americans and American interests worldwide?

In short, countries that are prime targets of the terrorist plague have neither been able so far to come up with reliable preventive measures nor even to pool their resources for that purpose. Where that leaves the tranquility of Western civilization is not even open to question.

Mr. Halasz is a veteran United Nations correspondent.