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TERRORISM

Asians Lead Rescue

Hindu Council responds vigorously to US Embassy bombing in Kenya

Prabha Prabhakar Bhardwaj, Kenya

Sanskrit shlokas to lord ganesha resounded through the hall as I watched the Hindu Council of Kenya joyfully inaugurate its Silver Jubilee conference on August 7. They had big plans: address challenges of Hindus in Africa, improve the image of Hindu Dharma there, and form a Hindu Council of Africa. But no sooner had the opening session concluded than an attending journalist's radio cackled wildly about a bomb blast at the US embassy. Council elders decided to continue informally with the proceedings but immediately dispatched the Youth Wing to assess damage and provide assistance.

Today the world knows all about the simultaneous bomb attacks in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam. What's less known is that Kenya President Daniel Arap T. Moi declared state mourning for five days and cancelled all functions. Consequently, the Hindu conference changed direction. Delegates from nine countries, who could not leave Kenya, did some pensive brain storming. Planned cultural activities became bhajana sessions praying for peace for departed souls

and speedy recovery of the injured.

Hindus generally, and the Hindu Council of Kenya in particular, were practically first to arrive at the disaster scene. Youth donated blood, assisted hospitals in nursing, ferried the injured, collected medicines from suppliers and took them to hospitals. I spoke with David Fox, Reuters Bureau Chief for East Africa. "Hindus and Sikhs were everywhere," he said, "picking rubble with their bare hands in an effort to reach trapped people, who were mostly dead. Rescue efforts were extremely haphazard; Asians took a lead and filled the vacuum. They donated blankets, blood and food. Remarkably, during riots this community is usually targeted, so why were they the first to help in a disaster situation? It's a fact that African Kenyans resent Asians for their success in all fields. I think by this they've enormously improved their image.

When Boston Globe correspondent Andrea Useem arrived, she noticed that most rescue workers and even curious bystanders were Asians. If most victims were Black Kenyans, why so many Asians on the scene, she wondered? She learned that many rescuers came from the Hindu Council and had cancelled most of their conference to provide relief. She was also impressed by follow-up medical clinics organized at Kenyatta National Hospital by 200 doctors and nurses from the Council and the hospital.

Over 300 Hindu youth volunteers provided fresh meals and refreshments to the patients and medical staff. Hundreds of blast victims were given more specific attention, as they had received only temporary treatment on the day of the disaster.

"No Asians died," Useem noted. "Doctors donated services to the blast victims, who were Black Kenyans. It was really nice to see this in a country which is often so racially segregated." Mr. Ashwinbhai, Vice-Chairman of the Council, said that since the tragedy brought together Kenyans of different races, it "enabled us to shed our earlier artificial barriers, pointing the way to a new beginning."

Kenyans took note. In the East African, journalist John Kariuki argued that resentment towards Asians "subsided considerably" after the disaster. He quoted Dr. Samuel Gatere, a Nairobi psychologist: "Their enthusiastic participation in the rescue and treatment of victims has greatly eased animosity towards them and proves that local Asians consider themselves true Kenyans." Mr. Bhat of the Council Youth Wing, noting that disaster relief was chaotic, is organizing public classes. "If people had the slightest clue about first aid or rescue work," he said, "more lives would've been saved."

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