Security alerts and their impacts on Africa

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the British security authorities’ discovery of two cars laden with gas canisters in central London on 29 June 2007 and the crashing of a car into Glasgow airport, British Security Minister Alan West revealed that the country faced a threat from more than 200 militant cells. Despite these terrorist incidences and the announcement of the Security Minister no country has issued a travel alert or ban to the UK. Similarly, when 52 people were killed by a series of terrorist bombs on 7 July 2005 in London, no travel alerts or bans were imposed on the UK. Notably, these bombings took place when the most powerful leaders of the world were meeting in Gleneagles, Scotland. In a show of solidarity with the British people, these leaders held a joint press conference and issued

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a stern warning to those planning similar acts. A similar posture was witnessed when terrorists bombed the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 9 September 2001. Instead of issuing travel warnings to the US, the world was encouraged to visit New York City to send a strong message to the terrorists that they cannot alter or interfere with the Western way of life and also to help the city recover the economic loss suffered in the aftermath of the attack. Tony Blair, then prime minister of Britain, even visited ‘Ground Zero’ to deliver British support in the declared ‘Global War on Terrorism’ (GWOT).

However, travel advisories or warnings by the US State Department, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Canadian Department of Foreign and International Trade (DFAIT) and Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) are regularly issued to alert citizens from the respective countries to avoid certain countries for security reasons. Besides having devastating affects on many African economies they are imposed on, there are now serious concerns being raised as to whether these alerts serve the purpose of ensuring that citizens of the respective countries are safe when they travel to the countries deemed insecure. It can be argued that issuing travel alerts is in line with the responsibility of governments to protect their citizens. However, does this responsibility extend to threatening the livelihoods of citizens of other countries that rely on income generated from the tourism industry? Why is it that existing lists contains only poor, non-Western countries? How come travel bans are rarely imposed on Western countries, particularly those most threatened by both domestic and international terrorism? This article highlights the inconsistencies of these travel advisories and analyses their consequences on African economies before concluding with a set of recommendations.

**Application of travel warnings and bans**

Kenya, a regular target of international terrorism, has complained that it is being punished by Western countries (despite being an ally in the GWOT) whenever travel alerts and bans are issued in response to intelligence reports showing imminent terrorist attacks. In May 2003, the US and Britain placed a ‘non-essential travel ban’ on Kenya after intelligence sources had picked up information about an ‘imminent threat’ on a British-registered aircraft. British Airways promptly suspended its flights to Kenya for almost a month while Germany, France, Belgium, Hungary and Australia also imposed bans on Kenya. These bans had devastating impacts on the country, as we shall see later.

Thus, when the US issued a travel warning to Kenya on 6 February 2007, the Kibaki government cried foul and accused the US of sabotaging the World Cross-Country Championships that were to take place on 24 March in the port city of Mombasa. Kenya was the second African country to host this athletics event, rated as the third most important in world. Kenya had not only lobbied heavily to host the athletics event but
also pumped millions of dollars into organising it. Besides showcasing its world-class elite athletes, Kenya also hoped to reap enormous economic benefits and free public relations as an attractive tourist destination.

The US State Department’s travel warning simply reminded ‘American citizens to consider carefully the risks of travel to Kenya at the time due to ongoing safety and security concerns’. Among the safety concerns cited in the travel advisory were the ‘continuing terrorist threats’ and ‘terrorist acts’ near Mombasa and other Kenyan ports. American citizens were also warned to avoid Kenya due to ‘increasing incidents of violent crime’ such as ‘carjacking and home invasions/burglary’, which, according to the advisory, the ‘Kenyan authorities have limited capacity to deter and investigate’. American tourists were warned to stay away from tourist sites, locations, clubs, hotels, resorts, upmarket shopping centres, restaurants and recreational facilities. They were literally told to stay away from Kenya or, if they do go there, to lock themselves up in their hotel rooms and avoid mingling with Kenyans!

The American alert was issued in reaction to the February demonstration in Mombasa by the Muslim community to demand the immediate release of fellow Muslims who had been arrested after crossing into Kenya after the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia or to ‘paralyse the cross-country’ event. However, this threat by the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya to disrupt the World Cross-Country Championships was later condemned by the Interfaith Council of Clerics and Muslims in Mombasa.

Despite assurances from Muslim leaders that they would not allow the name of their community to be used to disrupt this important event, Kenyan security authorities did not take matters for granted. The government beefed up security by increasing police presence, patrolling the seaside, and deploying all members of the specially trained VIP Protection Squad, the anti-terrorism unit, and diplomatic and tourist police in Mombasa.

Besides deployment of the Recce and G companies that are trained to protect VIPs, as well as carry out rescue and evacuation operations and control crowds, 200 police dogs (including sniffer dogs), hundreds of police vehicles and 40 crowd-control horses were also ferried from Nairobi and the Anti-Stock Theft Unit. Four police helicopters patrolled the air while boats from the navy, police, the Kenya Ports Authority, the Kenya Wildlife Service and the Kenya Revenue Authority patrolled the sea. In case riots were to break out, the marine police was ready to contain them with high-tech anti-riot vehicles fitted with water cannons. With these elaborate security measures, Kenya went on to hold one of the most colourful and successful sporting events in Africa despite the American security alert imposed on the country.

It is notable that the US State Department’s current list of ‘travel warnings’ contains 26 countries, of which 12 are African countries engaged in one form of conflict or another.
Among these countries are the Central Africa Republic (CAR), Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, Guinea, Burundi, Nigeria, Algeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Chad, Sudan and Somalia.

When the American list is compared to the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) list, it is distinctly different as the later contains countries such as Russia, Israel, and India. Although some countries on the US list, such as CAR, Guinea, Côte d’Ivoire, Somalia, Burundi, the DRC, Chad, Nigeria, Sudan and Liberia, also appear on the British list, it is more extensive as it includes many more African countries, including Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Rwanda, Uganda and Zambia. The FCO list excludes Algeria and Kenya but includes, in a recent update, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Madagascar.

The FCO has four categories of countries under travel advisory: countries against all travel to; countries against all travel to parts of; countries against all but essential travel to parts of; and countries against all but essential travel to parts of. Somalia has the dubious distinction of being the only country in the first category. Among the African countries in the second category are Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, the DRC, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Nigeria, Sudan and Uganda. The CAR and Liberia are in the third category, while Algeria, Angola, Burundi, Chad, Congo, the DRC, Guinea, Libya, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan, Uganda and Zambia are in the last category. Some countries, such as Burundi, the DRC, Nigeria and Uganda, appear in more than one category. The American list contains fewer African countries. However all the countries except Kenya also appear on the British list, namely Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Eritrea, Congo, the DRC, Algeria, the CAR, Burundi, Nigeria, Somalia and Sudan. It is interesting to note that countries such as Zambia, Libya, Niger and Mauritania that are on the FCO list are not on the US list.

There are many questions on the criteria used to create these listings. One could argue that Zimbabwe is more violent than some of these countries and yet it is not on the US list. No explanation from the US government has been forthcoming, but various reasons are given for the alerts. For instance, the crash of a Kenya Airways plane on 5 May 2007 after take-off from Douala airport in which five Britons died is one of reasons cited for a travel warning to Cameroon. The reasons for the travel alert to Zambia include severe seasonal rains that caused major flooding and an outbreak of measles in some districts. British citizens are warned against travelling to Tanzania because of ‘a high threat from terrorism, armed robberies, proximity to Burundi and Rift Valley Fever’. Interestingly, Kenya has also experienced outbreaks of Rift Valley Fever but British citizens travelling to Kenya are not warned against it. In addition, while terrorism is cited as a reason for avoiding Tanzania, no such warning has been issued vis-à-vis Kenya. (The US, on the other hand, does consider it necessary to warn its citizens against the threat of terrorism in Kenya.) It gets more confusing when one refers to the reasons British citizens are
warned not to go to Uganda – it is a neighbour of Kenya that has been a target of terrorism! Thus, while British citizens are not warned about travelling to Kenya, the US government warns its citizens ‘to consider carefully the risks of travel to Kenya at this time due to ongoing safety and security concerns’.

While the British sees ‘risk of indiscriminate terrorist attacks’ in Mali, the Americans do not, although they have set up the Trans-Sahelian Counter-Terrorism Initiative. This programme includes Mali Niger, Chad and Mauritania – which the US military regards as ‘the new front in the war on terrorism’. The British recognises the Ethiopia-Eritrea border problem as a security risk but the US does not. The British also identifies a ‘high threat from terrorism in Ethiopia’ and the likelihood of attacks ‘against civilian targets including places frequented by foreigners’ but the Americans do not. The British warning could be due to the kidnapping of five Britons in the Afar region in early March and the 24 April killing of 74 people by Ethiopian rebel gunmen during an attack on an oil field in Ethiopia’s Somali region.

While the US does not give any warning against travel to Israel, the FCO regards the country as ‘trouble-free’ but warns that there ‘is a high threat of terrorism’, particularly from the Occupied Palestine Territories, West Bank and Gaza. It gets even more confusing when one considers the fact that the FCO points out the existence of ‘a high threat of terrorism throughout India’ but the US does not! The US thinks there is a ‘possibility of … terrorist activity directed against American citizens and interests’ in Saudi Arabia but the UK does not perceive such a threat against its citizens and interests in the country.

**The impacts of warnings**

Although no comprehensive analysis has been done of the impact of these ‘alerts’ on African economies, it is estimated that the impact can be devastating if it is borne in mind that income from tourism-related industries drops by at least 70 per cent whenever such alerts are issued against countries that are dependent on revenue from tourism. The impacts of travel warnings and bans on African countries can be seen in two ways. First, these warnings instil psychological fear of imminent attack on a defenceless and helpless population. As a result of this fear, people’s lives are disrupted when they stay away from workplaces and shopping centres. Second, these travel warnings disrupt the tourism industry and airline travel in the fragile African economies that are sensitive to terror scares. In particular, the tourism-related service sectors, including airlines, hotels, entertainment, retail and restaurants, are affected as travellers cancel trips. When a travel warning is issued against a country that relies heavily on tourism, hotel occupancy rates drop significantly due to cancellations. This in turn leads to layoffs, not just of hotel employees but also in other industries that rely on tourists, such as art and craft stalls,
tour operations and money changing. A study conducted by the Kenyan Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2004 on the impact of travel bans on tourism in the country estimated that the direct impact of the travel ban imposed by the UK government alone amounted to UK£108 million – an amount equivalent to 1.6 per cent of the country’s national wealth. Besides the tourism industry that saw massive layoffs, the country’s horticultural industry also lost UK£3.5 million due to flight cancellations and the expense associated with premium freight costs. Another victim was the Kenya Wildlife Services (KWS) that lost revenue estimated at UK£7 million, which impacted on the wildlife and ecology of the country (Wachira 2004).

**Beneficiaries of security alerts**

In view of the above, citizens of Western countries are definitely not the beneficiaries of travel alerts and bans issued or imposed by their governments. Unbeknown to the West, particularly the USA, travel warnings inflame anti-American sentiments locally and provide rallying reasons for the expression of these sentiments. For instance, travel alerts on Kenya usually hurt tourism, which is the mainstay of the coastal areas and home to a huge Muslim population. The rising unemployment that this region usually experiences after travel alerts and bans has at times been regarded as a form of economic sanctions.

Terrorists use scare tactics as a form of promoting their causes, whatever they may be. They could be seen to score whenever they succeed in causing cause massive disruptions in countless lives and instil fear in innocent populations on the grounds of intelligence reports of ‘imminent attacks’. By issuing travel alerts and banning travels to areas that are vulnerable to terrorism, the wrong signals could be sent, namely that the world is scared of terrorists.

However, the main beneficiaries of the travel alerts are not terrorists but security technology companies. When a terrorist plot aimed at transatlantic flights was discovered in August 2006, the value of the inspection-system manufacturer, American Science and Engineering Inc, rose by 26 per cent to US$45.64 on the Nasdaq stock market, while that of OSI Systems Inc rose by 9 per cent to US$19.11. Other security and surveillance companies that have increased in value during terrorist scares include L-3 Communications Holdings Inc, Isonics Corporation, Digital Recorders Inc, Global ePoint Inc and Israel’s Magal Security Systems Ltd.¹

**Conclusion**

Travel alerts and bans can be very damaging to fragile economies when they are unfairly applied. Travel alerts on African countries usually exaggerate the security threat, are
inconsistent, unreasonable, and seem politically motivated. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) has adopted the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, which states in article 6 that ‘governments have the right – and the duty – especially in a crisis, to inform their nationals of the difficult circumstances, or even the dangers they may encounter during their travels abroad’. However, governments also have a ‘responsibility … to issue such information without prejudicing in an unjustified or exaggerated manner the tourism industry of the host countries’. In addition, governments are called upon to discuss ‘the contents of travel advisories … beforehand with the authorities of the host countries and the professionals concerned’ and to formulate ‘recommendations [that are] … strictly proportionate to the gravity of the situations encountered and confined to the geographical areas where the insecurity has arisen’. Finally, these advisories should ‘be qualified or cancelled as soon as a return to normality permits’.

Note

1 See <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14286942/>.

Reference