

Coping with fears of terrorism

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While 84% of Americans fear a terrorist attack on the US in the near future, only 27% say their country is well prepared to handle the situation.

A recent Synovate survey across 13 markets confirmed that citizens of countries which have been attacked in the past worry more about a possible recurrence.

The fear is highest in the UK, which was jolted by the public transport bombings in July. Nine out of 10 UK respondents said they expect another terrorist incident, the highest among all markets which took part in the study.

A little over 9,000 respondents were surveyed in the US, UK, Netherlands, France, Germany, Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia, Poland, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia and Singapore.

*The study was conducted in September and October, before the Bali and New Delhi bombings.

In the survey, 77% of UK respondents said they don't feel as safe as they used to, followed by 66% of Americans and 64% of Germans. "It is clear that the London bombings have heightened fears of another attack in the near future," notes Chris Dubreuil, research director at Synovate ViewsNet UK. "As a result, the UK public do not feel as safe as they used to and have changed their behaviour, heeding the government's message of vigilance."

Six out of 10 French feel similarly unsettled. "The fact that the findings show 84% of French people anticipate a domestic terrorist attack is unsurprising," comments Stephane Courqueux, managing director of Synovate's Paris office. "The UK and Spain have seen attacks over the past 18 months – it may only be a matter of time until we see something similar on French soil."

This view is mirrored on the other side of the Atlantic. "Americans continue to be on their collective guard, though they do claim to have made some lifestyle changes to be better prepared for an attack," says Larry Levin, head of the Synovate Americas marketing and client relationship team. "The terror of 9/11, coupled with the bombings in London this summer, have led the vast majority of Americans to agree that their country is susceptible to another violent attack. Importantly, only one in four Americans believe we are ready to respond."

In other countries where the fear of a terrorist strike is high, citizens seem to feel more confident about the preparedness of their countries to respond. Eighty-two per cent of Indian respondents – people who have lived through the attack on the Indian Parliament four years ago, decade-long strikes on holy shrines and assorted bomb blasts – still fear a repeat incident, yet three-quarters said their country could handle it.

"Globally, major initiatives to clamp down on terrorism have been taken," says Alok Shanker, managing director of Synovate in India. "India's security forces have also brought down the number of terrorist incidents. The progress in the peace process with neighbours as well as belief in India's military strength have also increased confidence among Indians".

These feelings of confidence would surely have dissipated as a result of the 29 October 2005 bombings in New Delhi. As Brahma Chellaney noted in today's Wall Street Journal Asia (31 October 2005), "India is responding typically to the latest horror - with brave words that can do little to hide its lack of both a coherent counterterrorism strategy and the political will to go beyond mere reprobation."

The sad legacy of terrorism is the change in behaviour to cope with a perceived unknown threat. A majority of UK and Indonesian respondents – 60% and 80% respectively – said they now look twice at other passengers on public transport. Roughly a third of respondents in these markets said they have minimised or stopped taking public transport altogether.

The way terrorism, just like personal tragedy, changes people's lives forever is highlighted by the heightened sense of carpe diem. Six out of 10 Americans said they live more for today knowing anything could happen tomorrow. Indonesia was the highest among all markets surveyed at 73%, but Synovate Indonesia managing director Robby Susatyo says this is "a reflection of the fatalistic attitude of people who live in poverty, regardless of terrorism."

At the other end of the spectrum is Hong Kong. Despite being a major financial centre and, arguably, a potentially attractive target for terrorism, only 12% of respondents think it could ever be attacked. Seventy-eight per cent have not made any changes in their behaviour at all as they don't perceive any threat.

"We don't have many highly politicised ethnic minority groups here," observes Scott Lee, a Synovate director based in Hong Kong. "It's generally very easy to control and safe. Not everyone feels safe though, and I suspect this may be because of SARS and bird flu. Hong Kong probably worries more about disease than political troubles."