

Trapped: My Twelve-Hour Ordeal in DusitD2

On Tuesday, January 15, my editor sent me on what I thought would be a routine, if unnecessary, assignment. I was to do an interview with George Ooko, the chief executive officer of the Commission for Revenue Allocation (CRA), which was to run in NTV's 9pm bulletin. As the reporter, I thought my story on county revenue was strong enough with the video clips we already had, and that it could run without it. But I was overruled, and along with my cameraman Dickson Onyango, I grudgingly set off for the DusitD2 complex on 14 Riverside Drive where CRA's offices are located.

The afternoon was sunny, hotter than usual, and dry. Our interview had been scheduled for 2:30 pm, but because of logistical challenges, we arrived at the venue some minutes past 2:40 pm. I was already anxious and irritable.

We were ushered into the boardroom of CRA's offices, located somewhere on the third floor of Grosvenor building, which is adjacent to the Dusit hotel.

Our interviewee Ooko arrived, and Dickson and I spent a few minutes setting up before settling down for the interview. But just before I asked my first question, we heard a loud explosion that must have lasted a few seconds and shook the entire building.

At first, we thought that the explosion was from a different building, perhaps from another office compound. But then, it was followed by gunshots. I remained unmoved in my seat, because I had not wrapped my mind around the fact that our building was under attack.

Ooko suggested that we hold the interview until we figured out what was happening. But just then, we heard a second explosion, again closely followed by gunshots. It is at this point that the CEO dashed to his office, leaving Dickson and I in the conference room.

From the windows, we could see people on the ground floor running for safety using the back exits with the help of the security guards. By this time, staff

members who were on our floor started running up and down the corridors. We got up and followed them, not really knowing where we were going.

I was running for the stairs holding the camera bag, which had other equipment inside; it weighed about 10kg. Dickson was holding the tripod and the camera.

On reaching the stairs, we found a crowd of people scampering for safety. Nobody at this point had figured out what was going on; the flight down the staircase was confused and disorganised. In my hands, I was still gripping the bag.

Dickson, thinking like a journalist, asked me to carry the tripod with the camera bag. He wanted to capture some video. But just before he could frame his shot, one of the assailants shot at us, forcing everyone to scamper for safety. The sound of the gun was so loud that we thought he had shot at us from inside the building, perhaps from the ground floor through the staircase.

And because of the terror, I remember freezing on my way up for a few seconds before I regained my senses. Dickson was running for the lifts, which I thought was not a good idea, but driven by panic I followed him. But the lifts did not open.

I ran into the nearest open door, which turned out to be the door that led to the washrooms on the first floor. Inside, I found some people, whose number I could not figure out at that moment. It is in this washroom that I remember mumbling some prayers to God for safety.

But once we entered one of the cubicles, our fears grew. Someone whose identity we could not figure out was trying to gain access to the washroom from the ceiling, which was cracking under his heavy weight. I didn't have time to think of how bizarre this was, or how on earth that person got there. We were just looking for somewhere to hide.

We ended up in an open space just outside the washroom, which was a room under renovation. Again, a shot was fired towards the window, I guess after one of the attackers saw us from outside. We ran back to the washroom without thinking twice, just that this time around we ran into the first cubicle, the second one's ceiling having proven unsafe. It later turned out that the "intruder" was one of the staff members of the CRA, who was stuck on the second floor. By this time I had abandoned the camera bag and the tripod in the empty room.



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We were seven people in the first cubicle, its small size notwithstanding. The second one now had other people. Our first thought was to lock the main door of the washroom from the inside before we locked the door of the small cubicle. I do not remember the person who offered to lock the main door leading to the washroom. All I can remember is that the last man who entered the cubicle, a tall clean-shaven man, was the one who locked the door of the cubicle.

I remember one of the people I was hiding with in the cubicle was breathing heavily, loud gasping breaths which scared most of us. In our thinking, any slight sound would alert the attackers to where we were. Our attempts to ask the good old man, who I later learnt was Prof. Edward Akong'o Oyugi, to manage his breathing, fell on deaf ears, adding to our turmoil.

I was sitting on the toilet seat, which I believed was the safest position and was away from the door, just in case one of the attackers gained access and tried shooting through the door of the cubicle.

But my comfort did not last. Since Prof. Oyugi, who by this time was leaning on the door of the cubicle, could not control his breathing, someone asked me to give up my seat for him. It meant that I would take up his position, which I thought was riskier since I would be standing directly opposite the door. But I got up, and gave the old man the seat.

The other people had taken up all the safe spots away from the door. I decided to squeeze myself to the side of the toilet seat. The other two men squeezed themselves on the opposite side, while another two stood on the opposite direction, but away from the door.

The heat inside out cubicle was beginning to get thicker and hotter. My standing position was also getting uncomfortable. Because of the squeezed space between

the toilet seat and the wall, I had to stand on one leg, and switch to the other often.

Any slight noise sent us all into a panic. I remember at one point someone in the opposite cubicle had tried flushing the toilet, I do not know for what reason, throwing the whole washroom into further panic mode.

By this time, the shooting was rampant, punctuated by tense silence.

I remember one man who had taken refuge in the wash area where the sinks were mumbling a prayer. In the adjacent cubicle, I could hear some people whispering what I believed were their last prayers. One was on the phone, telling the person on the other end that we were under attack.

The time now was heading towards 4pm. At this point, I decided to alert my colleagues in the newsroom on what was happening.

I checked my phone and news was already spreading that DusitD2 complex was under attack. I was scared for my life. I remember making a prayer to God asking him not to send me to hell if I died.

The ensuing hours would be some of my longest. We would swap sitting positions, but carefully so as not to make noise. My legs grew sore at some point, but the thought of getting killed in case I went outside the washroom kept me stuck in my position.

Lucky for us, the washrooms were air-conditioned, which helped cool the damp air that was increasingly filling up the space. My fear, however, was the gap underneath the cubicle door, which easily exposed our legs. We all tried as much as we could to push ourselves as far from the door as possible.

As time went by, the air in the washroom become thicker and heavier. I took off my tie and waistcoat, and so did the others. Seconds turned to minutes, and minutes into hours. We didn't speak much to each other. How could we? What can you tell six other strangers in that moment?

To keep myself distracted, I stayed in communication by text message with friends and colleagues, who were encouraging me to keep strong.

There were occasional gunshots, which made us jump every single time. At some

point, we heard someone try to gain access of the main door that led to the washrooms where we were in. We could not tell who it was, because they never gained entry.

We kept silent, and the good old professor tried to control his breathing, even though he occasionally went back to his “default setting”.

I remember telling the people I was hiding with that help had come after my colleagues in the newsroom informed me that the police had arrived at the scene. This was sometime after 4pm. Little did I know that I would spend the next 12 hours holed up in the same place.

I had by then not informed my parents about the situation since I knew they would get too anxious and panicky. But I kept contact with my colleagues. My bosses had also reached out to me, asking me not to lose hope as they were trying all they could to get me help. I remember speaking to Dickson just a few minutes after we separated, telling him that I was hiding inside one of the washrooms on the first floor. I later learnt that he was hiding on the same floor, but in a different room.

I remember one dear friend from work asking me to keep communicating with her through text messages. I know she was trying to keep me calm. This, however, did not last long, as my phone battery died. I do not remember what time it was, but before my phone went off, I gave her a number of one of the people I was with so that she could reach me.

I informed my parents of what was happening some minutes past 10 pm with the help of a friend. And since I knew how agitated my father would become, I told my friend to notify my mother first. I can't imagine what she felt at that moment.

News had by this time spread that two NTV journalists were part of the hostages trapped inside the complex. That in part got me worried, because I could not imagine what would happen if the terrorists got wind of this and stormed our hiding place.

At some point, I lost hope, thinking that we would only be rescued in the morning. But we resolved that we would fight the attackers, and at least die fighting in case they got to us.

Sometimes towards midnight, we heard loud noises and the lights suddenly went off. We agreed not to open the doors until we were sure that those knocking were the police.

We stayed in darkness for another two to three hours before we finally heard footsteps inside the building. When the police got to us, we were ordered to walk out one by one, with our hands raised up. They frisked us before asking us to sit down at a central place as they combed other rooms looking for hostages. The time was about 3:45 am.

Those 12 hours taught me the value of family and friends, and that life is a gift. Live every day as if it was your last day alive, because one of these days, you might just be right.

I occasionally get paranoid. I am still afraid of being in the dark. Noises and bangs on the door scare me a lot. I am afraid of staying in crowded places. I get anxious being by myself. I still live scared. But I hope it will end soon.