Death of Fear in the Middle East- Turmoil in Bahrain

There was nothing foreboding as we ushered 2011 in; the economic turmoil and the debates on healthcare reform kept the pundits busy. The earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand rattled the world with the death and destruction that wrought havoc in a developed nation. Nothing prepared us for what was to come in North East Japan. The destruction with over 10,000 lives lost from an earthquake a thousand times greater in magnitude followed by the Tsunami and now the nuclear fall out are just but a series of events that continue to test the resilience of survival and adaptability of man in such overwhelming situations. What is written into disaster management plans will not prepare us totally for the aftermath of what is left for us to pick up and move on.

There has been a different sort of crisis unfolding in the Middle-east, this time man made. An unknown fruit seller Mohammed Bouazizi on the streets of a remote village in Tunisia immolated himself out of frustration and in humiliation of being slapped by a female governmental official who objected to him selling fruits on the streets in his village, wanting bribes for a permit. (He had tried for months to obtain this permit but in vain) It was a spark that has ignited a chain of events that has now affected several countries in the region. The genie of fear that had been bottled for so long was out with chants of freedom. The social fabric that was held together by fear of oppression and intimidation was unraveling.

Much of the images and the real issues on the ground would never reach a threshold of interest in the west until what was happening here would destabilize the shoots of economic recovery affecting pretty much every part of the globe. Bahrain is a small island with a population of just 1.2 million and sits off the eastern shores of Saudi Arabia, connected to the eastern shores by a 25 km bridge over the sea. Bahrain happens to be the base of the US 5th Fleet central command. They oversee among other things the critical waterway that oversees the world’s busiest oil shipping corridor with Iran across its shores. Unrest here has global implications on the price of gas being paid at the pumps worldwide. The American Mission Hospital has been on the island for over 110 years, well before the discovery of oil. Established by missionaries from the Reformed Church in America the hospital has served the people of Bahrain and neighboring countries for over a century.

As the political unrest spread across the region like an epidemic, there was nothing much to inoculate or isolate Bahrain from these unrests. The social media has brought about a new tool that has flamed the calls for freedom far and wide. Handouts and promises were no longer sufficient to placate the ‘genie’ back into the bottle. Fear of death seemed no longer a fear at all. These are some of the images from Bahrain last week. We read about ambiguous threats as part of risk assessment in managing operations; I list just a few that I faced over the last few days; nothing prepares us for leading in such crisis and yet it is up to us to deep dive and find solutions when none are available.

As I write this, the streets are calmer with certain parts of the city under curfew. Military checkpoints dot the island, our hospital received casualties; we are on emergency mode with routine clinics cancelled. Working with a core group of essential staff to keep the hospital operational. All of a sudden laundry, waste disposal, cafeteria and food supply for staff in the frontline have all become significant issues. (Supply chain management is non-existent) Creating living/sleeping space for staff who cannot go home, access to the hospital for staff from where
they live, and ambulance drivers abandoning their vehicles to join the protests are some of the issues I am dealing with. The biggest ambiguous threat that we faced was from within the organization when a majority of our local admin staff walked out leaving insurance and cashiering services severely curtailed and Finance having to give crash courses to Pharmacists and nurses to perform this function. It has been a steep learning curve to steer the organization called ‘The American Mission Hospital’ in uncharted waters of political upheaval when sentiments against anything American can be double edged.

A sense of calm has come over as I write this, with Government forces regaining control of the streets. There was a period of total lawlessness that paralyzed this peaceful nation and fractured the lives of people through religious and political divides. Images are from what happened with the second image of the first woman casualty being taken for burial through the front of the hospital. We happened to be just 1.5kms away from the epicenter of what happened. Thankfully all our staff are safe and responded in every way they could to take care of the wounded that came into our facility. We are rewriting our disaster preparedness plans based on what we have learned.

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Funeral of first woman protester killed