

## THE MAN WITH AN UNRIVALLED HEIGHT OF BRAVERY



# Issa Premji

Issa Premji is a figure well-known not just in the Ismaili community, but in extension, the entire Nairobi security fraternity. He presents the epitome of selfless service as he constantly puts his life on the line to save others. Just like the rising sun, he is a surety. Premji, with a credible amount of experience

under his belt, was at the forefront of the rescue and evacuation efforts during the appalling September 21, 2013 Westgate Shopping Mall siege. One year on as wounds begin healing and life slowly but surely resumes with some level of normalcy, Issa - the man who dares not mince his words – speaks to The Asian Weekly on his role during that fateful day as we reflect on the day that was and the status quo of the country's security sector.

**By Hussein Jiva**

have completed a Diploma in Security Management and Disaster Management and I'm currently undertaking a degree on the same. In relation to this, I have also completed a course in Advanced Cardiac Life Support, and have fully qualified in First Aid and Disaster response.

*It is already clear that you have the passion to help and serve the community...*

Yes, I developed a passion for security from a very young age. Security has been my forte for quite a while, having been in the field for almost 22 years. I take great pride in volunteerism and I have been serving members of the communities with respect, patience, courage and humility.

*Premji, you are a man of various facets; what else do you do for the community?*

I'm dedicated to serving every member of community when called upon. I am an active member with the Aga Khan Local Risk Management (LRM) and currently the member-in-charge of Disaster Preparedness for Nairobi. I also give my time and voluntary service to other committees within the community. In addition, I am also a member of the Lions Club International with the Lions Club of Nairobi Greater - District 411A, a life member of the Kenya Red Cross and the member-in-charge of disaster with the Kenya Red Cross, Parklands branch.

*You are heavily invested and are highly affluent in matters pertaining security. What posts do you currently hold?*

I am the Chief Security Officer (CSO) and Security

Manager for Kingsway Tyres Limited in Kenya, with a mandate to oversee all the security requirements of the company's head office and all the branches countrywide. I am also the Security Consultant for Kingsway Group of Companies as well as MP Shah Hospital. This is in addition to the voluntary work I indulge in on the aforementioned areas.

*With so many commitments – how do you manage to balance work and personal affairs?*

I'm honoured to be a part of these organisations where I am able to give my time and services. I must proudly admit that I have the most beautiful and supportive wife. Natasha and I have been together for the last 10 years, and married for one year. Throughout these 11 years, her endless love and empathy has not deterred me but assisted me to achieve what I have wanted to. She understands the magnitude of my commitments and the passion I have for it. We love, respect, inspire, trust and complete each other. I would like to sincerely thank her for being an exceptional soul mate - I must say she is one of my greatest blessings from God.

*You must be a lucky man. Issa, you were one of the unsung heroes of the atrocious attack on Westgate Shopping Mall. Do you mind briefly reliving your involvement in that episode – especially your rescue efforts?*

I received a call at around 12:30pm alerting me that there was a gunfire at the Westgate Shopping Mall. I wasn't far away and within minutes, I arrived at the mall, just minutes after the terrorists struck. At that point, there was a lot of shelling and confusion was in the air. Responding as the Kenya Red Cross member, I met up with Abbas Gullet, the Secretary-General, and began to mobilise members who were trained in First Aid. Once Gullet received a clearance to enter the mall,

**Please introduce yourself to our readers.**

I was born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya and studied at The Aga Khan Primary School and The Aga Khan Academy, before moving to Saint Austin's Academy and finally The Kenya Institute of Criminal Justice. In 1986, I joined The Aga Khan Scouts as a cub – then moved up to a Junior scout, later a Senior scout and finally became the Senior scout leader. It was this achievement that saw me rewarded with The Lion Scout honour - the highest scouts award. However, moving into security matters, I

we moved in with my team of First Aiders along with other civilians to the rooftop parking. We were on a rescue mission to ensure those injured were given immediate emergency medical assistance on site before evacuating them to hospitals. Our focus was to save lives and we continued to attend to the casualties.

Once the roof top parking was cleared, we continued with the team as we rescued those trapped and forced to hide inside the mall. We moved floor by floor, ensuring those injured were taken outside and attended to by the First Aiders there. The seriously injured victims were attended to inside the mall before being evacuated. I recall the top floors were more accessible and we could proceed fairly well, however we were forced to crawl at the lower floors due to constant crossfire. The scale of those injured was horrific! I recall tending to at least 50 to 60 victims in addition to leading those trapped in the mall. In truth, there was no time to think; my body was pumping with adrenaline and my only focus was getting to the injured and helping them escape.

Each member of the medical personnel was given a team of armed police officers who offered protection as the injured were being attended to.

It was encouraging that everyone cooperated, while the police seemed eager for us to lend our assistance. We later received information that there were many trapped at a shop - Mr Price - on the ground floor. We carefully moved in with our teams and rescued almost 60 people, while two injured who were medically attended to were later evacuated.

Looking back, the Westgate Shopping Mall attack displayed how the members of the different communities and faiths came together and worked with harmony, bravery and heroism. Truly, 'We Are One.'

#### ***Back to the present; in terms of security, what have we learnt from the Westgate attack a year on?***

We have learnt to be more careful and extra vigilant at all times with what we do and where we go. When it comes to terrorism, you cannot predict when it will strike. We therefore depend on the country's intelligence system to warn us on any threats that they receive.

#### ***While that is ok, more importantly, what have we implemented to ensure security?***

There has been an improvement in security within the country. The public is more vigilant as many malls have tightened their security through additional security guards and screening at entry points. There has also been an increase in armed police officers patrolling the cities in the country, especially at public gatherings. I must add that the country's intelligence system has also improved.

#### ***Issa, the raid on Mpeketoni, Lamu saw the police being overcomed in a period of 45 minutes – as per a documentary aired on national television. Do you feel our national security is at par with international standards?***

Like I said, you never know when an attack will strike the nation. However, I feel we are not at par with the international standards. With the increase in vigilance and additional deployments of police officers, perhaps we will get there.

#### ***Let us step down matters to community policing. We have often seen ORC vehicles and The Aga Khan Local Risk Management patrolling the city. How efficient is this medium of policing?***

Let me begin by saying community policing is a policy and a strategy aimed at achieving more effective and efficient crime control, reduce fear of crime, improve quality of life, improve police services and police legiti-

macy through a proactive reliance on community resources. This assumes a need for greater accountability of police, greater public share in decision making and greater concern for civil rights and liberties.

#### ***However, it can only be achieved through the assistance of the government's security arm and vice-versa...***

Yes. In order for police to achieve better rapport with the community, departments need to evolve into and operate as open systems. This has tremendous implications on the organisation of police departments. This would require police departments to become more decentralised so as to allow better deployment of security personnel in the community and allow more effective use of officers and response to citizens as we build the network relations with citizens. It is also important to have a more flat rank structure; this will allow officers to continue good performance without necessarily aspiring to command senior positions. This will improve the quality of police personnel in the field. Furthermore, the use of more civilians in auxiliary and liaison functions will generate closer ties with the community as well as free officers to do police work.

#### ***For fear of losing track on the matter, back to community policing. How does it work?***

It has to be enforced properly so as to become effective in assisting the police fight crime. For instance, Operation Reduce Crime (ORC), operates from 6.00pm to midnight, patrolling around Parklands, Westlands and part of Ngara area. By doing so, it helps the police respond to crime efficiently and on time, as per the information received.

The Aga Khan LRM acts as facilitators; when a crime is in progress or already has already occurred, the response team picks up officers from police stations and transports them to the scene. This response team responds with fully qualified First Aiders - in case there are any injuries.

#### ***On that note, for the benefit of our readers, kindly take us through a brief written drill on how to immediately react, should there be a fire or an ambush by thugs.***

##### ***Let us review some fire safety tips:***

- Evacuate and report!
- Upon hearing a fire alarm, the first priority is getting out safely. Once clear of the building and in a safe location, call fire emergency services.
- Take all fire alarms seriously and leave the building immediately. Sound the alarm or shout 'fire' if you are the one to witness a fire.
- Remain calm and do not panic.
- Feel door handles on your way out; if they are warm do not open the door. If you cannot get out, signal for help.
- Ensure you close all doors behind you.
- Stay low when there is smoke; the air is cleaner and cooler.
- Always use closest exits or stairways - never use elevators.
- Do not risk your safety by fighting the fire if you are not a trained fire marshal or lack knowledge on how to operate fire extinguishers.
- Once outside do not go back inside the building until cleared by the fire department.

Should you be ambushed by thugs, the following points are important:

- Remain calm and in control; do not be a hero.
- Comply with the robber's instructions – do as you are told.
- Keep all movement short and smooth and give only what is asked for.
- Carefully observe the physical details of your attack-

ers.

- Don't use any weapons.
- Don't follow the robbers. Most robberies are committed under the influence of drugs, therefore the robbers may be highly unstable.
- Avoid giving the robber any surprises. The longer it takes, the more nervous the robbers get.

#### ***Thanks for that. And what knowledge should the common mwananchi equip him or herself as basic safety tips?***

I can mention a few of them; it is always important to maintain good relations with your guard and staff at work. Never give a lift to strangers as trickery could be used to hijack or rob you. Try and avoid travelling at night – especially if you are alone. Furthermore, ensure your doors are locked and windows wound up if not at home. Finally, when approaching the gate of your residence, be extra vigilant around the area and look out for suspicious characters. These are but a few of many safety tips.

#### ***In a recent interview with a Kenyan media house, Shabbir Talab, a community policing volunteer and Asian community leader said members of the country's Asian community keen on serving the country in the security forces were not allowed to join the mainstream police or intelligence agencies, only as Reservists. What is your take?***

There is no issue with the Asian community joining or serving in the mainstream police or intelligence agencies. I would say that it's not that they are not allowed to join, but that they prefer not to join as it becomes a full time job with minimal pay. They would rather join the Reservists as that system allows you to work elsewhere and still serve as a police officer. However, as of now there are no Reservists.

#### ***On a different note, social media has helped a lot in informing people on dangers. However, it is also a cause for panic and unverified claims that heighten fears. How do we govern this medium of information?***

Verified and confirmed information posted on social media has been beneficial to many members of the public. On the other hand, if not verified, it can cause a lot of panic. It is very hard to prevent or people from posting alarming issues that will cause panic to the public. Some people do so intentionally while others assume that they are being helpful by posting unverified claims on social media avenues such as Facebook or WhatsApp. It is very important for the admin on these platforms to be very efficient and quickly remove the post if it proves to be untrue or unconfirmed. However, that will still not prohibit the people from posting unverified claims. Therefore it is important to seek clarification and verification of reports with the appropriate authorities before disseminating it to the masses.

#### ***Finally, would you like to add anything you feel strongly about regarding the matters of interest?***

Yes, my parting shot is that disaster is a situation resulting from an environmental phenomenon, armed conflict, terrorism or natural disasters that produces stress, personal injury, physical damage and economic disruption. Taking steps to make your home and family safe is one of the most important tasks to undertake prior to a disaster or a crisis. It is also important to educate your family about emergency preparedness and create a family emergency plan in advance. Make sure every member of the family is familiar with the plan and ensure you have practiced the drill before. Moreover, always have at least two places to meet up should a crisis or a disaster strike. And with that, be safe and God bless.