

# TTUTA ON TUESDAY

## Techno-terrorism and our Schools

THE EVENTS of Friday, April 28 once again bring to the fore the vulnerable nature of schools to tech-savvy miscreants who derive pleasure from unleashing terror and fear upon thousands of innocent citizens.

At the start of a routine school day, suddenly school officials were confronted with a ghastly e-mail message that could have turned schools into a state of pandemonium and confusion had it not been for the exceptional professionalism of school officials.

Thankfully, schools prepare for these unfortunate situations through the guidance of the crisis management and health and safety committees that routinely conduct risk assessments and put in place measures to

mitigate against these identified risks.

Once again TTUTA commends the highly skillful and co-ordinated manner in which evacuation procedures were instituted at all of the affected schools.

Unfortunately, the over-centralised decision-making procedures that have emerged as the new status quo by the Ministry of Education rendered school supervisors bewildered and unable to give guidance to school officials in this time of crisis.

Recent policy shifts by the ministry have been undermining and gradually removing the discretionary power enshrined in the job description of principals to act in situations such as

this.

Thankfully, school officials were able to prove that they were more than up to the task, exercising professional and informed judgment to ensure the safety of all students and school officials alike in the absence of guidance from the hierarchy of the ministry.

This situation once again demonstrates the folly of micromanagement and the danger of consistently upending the discretionary authority of on-site managers.

Going forward, it is hoped that the head of school security and the leadership of the ministry will conduct a comprehensive review of the day's events, with the input of all stakeholders to better manage such and similar situations in the future.

It is no secret that the majority of the nation's schools were designed prior to the inception of the Occupational Safety and Health Act and thus are not in strict conformity with its provisions.

While crisis management teams ought to exist at all schools along with health and safety committees, their functioning can be hampered by limited resources, inclusive of human expertise.

Muster points in many schools are merely open spaces that are available depending on the layout of the schools and these are sometimes not strictly up to the task.

School officials were forced to manage hundreds of students out in the scorching sun for extended periods while they waited for the police and fire officials to visit the school and conduct the necessary inspection procedures. Many students succumbed to the heat and fainted while principals waited for "permission" to dismiss.

Again, in the absence of the principal being able to exercise discretion, there are no guidelines as the amount of time students should be kept in a muster point before dismissal.

Some muster points do not facilitate easy egress from the school compound owing to constraints of space.

Serious consideration must now be given to ensure there are specified requirements for muster points, given the peculiarities of schools. This may necessitate the expenditure of funds to create these safe spaces.

Mindful of the rise in cyber and techno-terrorism as well as the inherent vulnerability of schools to gun violence and criminal elements, it is necessary to engage in a comprehensive review of safety and evacuation procedures at the nation's schools and bolster school security systems based on the overall unfortunate experience.

The learning opportunity arising out of this act of terrorism ought not to be lost going forward. New guidelines must also be developed to treat with cyberthreats, at both the level of the school and ministry hierarchy.

Commendation must also be extended to both the police and fire service for the remarkable manner in which they reached out to schools, lending guidance and assistance to school officials in a time of unprecedented crisis, given the sheer magnitude of the threat and their limited resources.

It is unfortunate that schools are no longer the safe sanctuaries that they ought to be. Over the years we have witnessed the infiltration of gang violence and drug use into school compounds and this cyber-attack may unfortunately represent a new dawn for which schools must be prepared.

This is indeed a new chapter of school violence that must be confronted. Thankfully, to date the threat has remained only that, but given the propensity of some individuals to derive pleasure from death and destruction, the threat ought not be minimised.