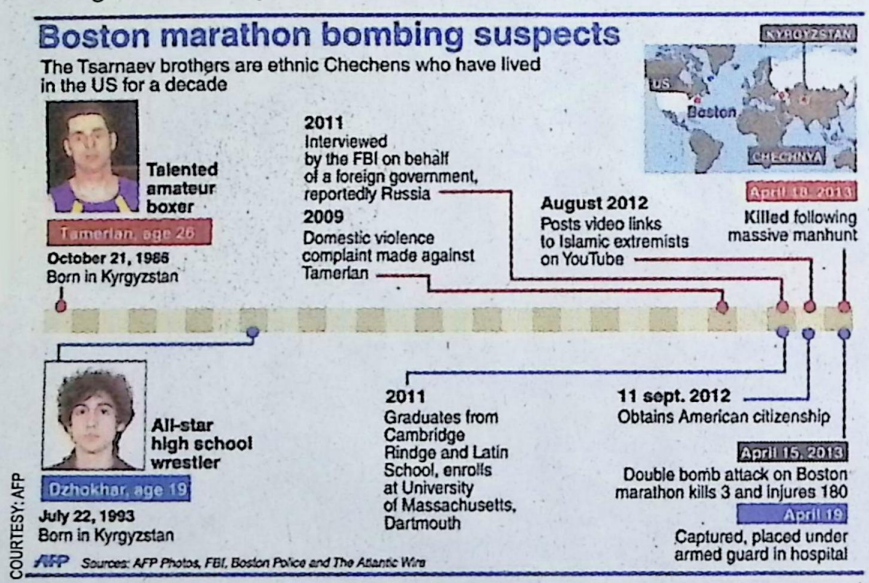
In his speech at the Boston inter-faith prayer service, American President Barack Obama referred to the human spirit that surges each time there is a catastrophic calamity: "You will stand, walk and run again ...Your resolve is the greatest rebuke to whoever committed this heinous act."

The world saw the power of this soft security strategy after the bombs rocked Boston. The newspapers referred to those who rushed in to help as heroes. In security terms, they are also known as the "first responders".

They are the ones who swing into action, long before the authorities trained to handle terrorist attacks, arrive at the scene of carnage and mayhem. The first responders' swift response sends a message to terrorists that they cannot win their war against humanity.



COURTESY: AFP

Video footage of the two explosions shows just how powerful first responders can be. Two seconds after the first bomb, runner Bill Iffrig, 78 years old, fell.

Four seconds later, a policeman was by his side. Twelve seconds later, the second bomb goes off and by then, the scene is crawling with more policemen with their guns drawn, volunteers, soldiers, doctors, nurses, ordinary people - pulling down barricades, clearing human traffic and reaching those who lay injured.

The sound of ambulance sirens can be heard only more than a minute after the first blast. One report said these helpers cleared the sidewalk of the severely injured within 15 minutes.

The helpers improvised. Makeshift stretchers were made by ripping off parts of a display wall. When a doctor ran out of tourniquets, he swiped clothes off racks from shops lining the route. Dr Pierre Rouzier, stationed at the medical tent to treat exhausted runners, gave hope to the injured: "A woman reached up and grabbed my right arm. She said 'I'm going to die right here and no one's going to know where I am.' I held her hand, got close to her face and said 'you're not going to die.'".

Dr Adrienna Wald brought 30 nursing students to the marathon as volunteers. They ended up treating the seriously injured.

"It was a gory, gruesome scene. Who could ever be prepared for this?" she asked. It was only some three hours after the attack that the commander of a country under siege, President Obama, addressed the nation, putting out the facts and reassuring many that justice will prevail. By then, the country had plunged into a frantic hunt for the perpetrators of a senseless violent act that killed three and wounded more than 170.

In an uncertain world, no one can ever be fully prepared for an attack of this nature.

In Singapore, the home-front crisis management structure helps to bring together quickly resources from different government bodies to manage a disaster.

This structure was activated during the Nicoll Highway collapse and H1N1 outbreak. Regular exercises also help to evaluate capabilities to deal with national crises.

There are also efforts to strengthen community bonding. One example is the Community Engagement Programme, where grassroots, union and school leaders carry out security exercises to tackle a terrorist incident. But the public needs to work harder on the important role it can play in soft security.

Three years ago, the Singapore police parked vehicles in nine locations around the island. Wires were sticking out from the under-carriage and smoke came out from the boot. Of the 7,200 people who walked past the vehicle between 8am and 7pm, only 260 - or 3.6 percent - noticed that something was wrong.

More needs to be done to educate Singaporeans that living with the risk of bombs is something to be taken seriously.

Will there be enough first responders to help stabilise the scene? Will some at the scene help the injured, or will all flee the scene of carnage? Will citizens come together to cope and heal, or will there be quick finger-pointing at the authorities for not securing the nation's safety? When the first bomb goes off here, what will we do?

– M NIRMALA
AAN