

Is national media coverage of Cedar Riverside fire connected to scrutiny of Somali Americans?

Written by Lolla Mohammed Nur, TC Daily Planet
Monday, 13 January 2014 16:05



I woke up Tuesday morning to Facebook posts from my Somali American friends expressing their sadness and confusion about the Cedar Riverside apartment fire that day. The fire left 14 injured, destroyed a halal market, and also partially damaged a nearby mosque. Many of my friends and acquaintances were in disbelief and shock at the news as the new year began.

I also noticed national and international media (CNN, The Guardian, NY Daily News) covered the fire as well, and my first question was: Why? Neighborhood fires happen all the time; what is the national peg of a Twin Cities fire? I am not trying to take away from this tragedy, but, I'm sure there are many tragedies that have killed or injured more people or caused far more damage, but have not made it to national news. So, what is so special about the Cedar Riverside fire?

When I interviewed Burhan Mohamed, a Somali American and Cedar Riverside resident, he said he thinks it has to do with the increased national media scrutiny on his neighborhood since Al Shabab's Nairobi mall attack in September last year.

"It's a fall out from all the connections they tried to make in the past couple of months with Cedar Riverside [and Al Shabab's recent mall attack in Nairobi]," he said. "So every little move and happening in this neighborhood is now being paid a whole lot of attention to."

He continued: "If you look at how much [media] coverage we've been getting... we're getting used to how much attention is put on us."

"It is sort of a big deal in that people were hurt and jumping out the windows. But, I'm sure fires happen all over the country and they don't get this much attention; they're not under that media scrutiny," he said.

To Mohamed and others in the Minneapolis community, the fire is a tragedy. The Somali community here is mourning. Yet, Mohamed said he saw tweets within hours of the fire from at least one media personality on twitter who tried to make connections between the fire and Al Shabab's attack on Jazeera hotel in Mogadishu the same day.

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UPDATE : Check my timeline for connections between Minneapolis neighborhood where building exploded this AM and Somali suicide bombings.

— Lee Stranahan (@Stranahan) January 1, 2014

Imagine if a terror attack went off in the USA on New Years Day at the same time car bombs went off in Somalia. That's an Al Qaeda dream.

— Lee Stranahan (@Stranahan) January 1, 2014

Stating the obvious : I have no idea whether the explosion relates to the Halal grocery or Islamic Society. OR if related, how. No clue.

— Lee Stranahan (@Stranahan) January 1, 2014

Now we have a bombing in Somali and on the same day as an explosion at a building in Minneapolis's "Little Somali". Prayers for the victims.

— Lee Stranahan (@Stranahan) January 1, 2014

The three men in that Al Qaeda recruitment video are from the same Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of today's explosion in Minneapolis.

— Lee Stranahan (@Stranahan) January 1, 2014

Tweets like that, during a sad time like this, are racist, Islamophobic, and unfounded, according to Mohamed.

"He's not the only one. I know, in the future, people are going to start coming out of the woodworks [and reach to make connections]," Mohamed said. "Personally, I don't feel safe [with the scrutiny]. I'm worried, because if you keep talking about something, you will talk it into existence."

So, what do our readers think? Are people trying to connect dots that are not there in the first place, and did national media overreact by covering the fire? Does the coverage show increased media scrutiny of Somali Americans? And, should people be worried about the Minnesota connection to terrorism in Somalia?

Or is raising this question - in this case particularly - invalid, disrespectful and borderline Islamophobic? Personally, my view is the latter. I think it is unfair and bigoted to assume the worst about a clearly grieving community during a tragedy like this.

Particularly considering that an FBI spokesperson has said, according to MPR that, "it would be sheer speculation to theorize what may have occurred here as far as any mosque or any other business in the area. So we're going to wait for the first responders to discover the facts and we'll go from there."

I agree. I say we leave the story where it's at, and allow the Somali American community to grieve. I hope we can try to find ways to support the vibrant and bustling Cedar Riverside community to rebuild the social capital that has been lost because of this fire. And I hope people

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recognize that it is not fair to scapegoat an entire community based on isolated incidents. I am glad, however, that the tone of local media has been one of empathy, and not of accusation.