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Fear Unites Us, Drives Us Apart

IN THE SUBWAYS



Ray Sánchez

The two men, their eyes wide with fear, stood motionless as a half-dozen police officers surrounded them near the turnstiles of a Queens subway station.

Around them, life went on as usual: The token booth clerk took care of a small line of customers, a newsstand operator sat near a portable fan, and subway riders dashed for the stairs with the sound of trains pulling into the Kew Gardens / Union Turnpike station.

Evans Korankye, 32, a West African emigrant, was sitting next to the two men on the E train just half an hour earlier. When the train pulled into the station Tuesday morning, he said, the doors wouldn't open.

Korankye remembered three uniformed officers on the Queens-bound platform, peering into the idling subway cars until they spotted the two men. The men appeared to be Indian or Pakistani. Perhaps Bangladeshi.

"They were looking at our faces," Korankye was saying yesterday.

The sliding doors opened, the officers boarded and asked all the passengers to leave the train. All the passengers except the two thin, olive-skinned men carrying black bags.

On the subway, Korankye said, the officers searched a black knapsack and plastic bag the men had been carrying. The bags' contents — mostly papers — were emptied on the seats.

Now the train was taken out of service. The two men were taken up one level, corralled by blue uniforms in front of the turnstiles. There were six, maybe eight officers. Some officers again searched the black bags, removing more documents and making calls from a pay phone.

"You're thinking these guys must be part of Osama bin Laden's terror network," Korankye said.

That's what everybody in the subway station must have thought when the officers started searching the men for weapons. They asked the men to raise their pant legs above their knees. They patted down their socks before escorting the pair out of the station.

Korankye heard a subway rider had called police from his cell phone. The caller reported seeing two suspicious men with black bags on the subway.

A police lieutenant later confirmed that the men were questioned after a phone tip and released. But he refused to say why the men were taken from the subway, searched and interrogated.

"Nothing happened," the lieutenant was saying, growing impatient with each question. "It was a bogus call."

"I tried explaining to other passengers that there must have been a misunderstanding," Korankye was saying. "But they said the men were Arabs. One man said, 'You never know with Arabs.' It is crazy."

And, unfortunately, it is a reflection of our world from now on.

The suicide attacks on the World Trade Center still reverberate in the subways, a microcosm of a city and nation on the edge.

Since the attacks, people who look Middle Eastern and South Asian, whatever their religion or nation of origin, have been singled out for harassment, threats and assaults.

Many people have become hyper-vigilant, suspicious of anyone with brown skin, especially men with turbans and beards. There have been beatings and shootings, including the slaying of a Pakistani grocer near Dallas and a drunken mob attack on two Albany college students of Middle Eastern descent.

"There is really an aggressive approach to profiling brown people," said Sin Yen Ling, a legal fellow with the Manhattan-based Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund. "That's the other side of the backlash."

The suicide attacks have simultaneously united and driven us apart. A new hate has blossomed from the hate that leveled the Twin Towers.

A makeshift shrine to those who perished in the World Trade Center has gone up on the white, tiled walls near the Times Square Shuttle.

Yesterday, thousands of New Yorkers slowed down to read the names, to see the faces of the missing spread out on dozens of fliers taped to the train station walls. People burned candles and left flower bouquets near wedding photos and snapshots of happy people with pets or holding hands on white sand beaches.

The names were Del Valle and Lim and Gambale and Lira and St. Rose and Louie and Khan and Supinski and Singh and Villanueva and Cho and Holmes and Ngo. They were blacks, Asians, whites and Latinos, Arabs and Jews and Muslims.

Still — no matter how moved we all were by the hate and destruction, no matter how close this tragedy has brought us — nobody could bring themselves to take a seat on the F train yesterday next to Ahla Kausar, 17, and her mother, Waseem.

They are Pakistani and wear colorful, flowing dresses and dark scarves.

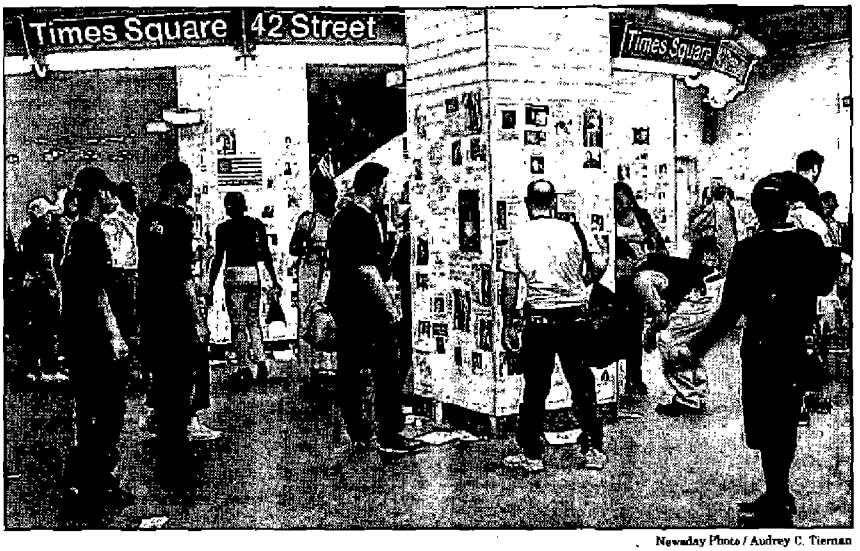
"They don't want to sit next to me. Why?" Ahla was saying yesterday. "Because of the way I look. I find it amusing. They are so ignorant."

Ahla is a student at Hillcrest High School in Queens.

"Since last week all I hear in school, in the subway, is, 'Oh my god, you're a terrorist.' Everybody's pointing fingers," she said.

Waseem Kausar said she was afraid of sending her daughter to school.

"They say we have to fight racism and terrorism," Ahla said. "Then they turn around and do this to you."



Newsday Photo / Audrey C. Tiernan

People stop to look at the photos of World Trade Center victims that line the walls at the Times Square subway station at 42nd Street yesterday.

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