

Norway vows not to change after attacks - but fears it must

Written by AFP / The Swedish Wire

Tuesday, 02 August 2011 09:13 - Last Updated Tuesday, 02 August 2011 17:00



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OSLO (AFP) - Long considered one of the world's safest and most peaceful countries, Norway is braced for changes to its traditionally open society after the deadly twin attacks on July 22.

Sweden was shaken by the assassination of prime minister Olof Palme and later foreign minister Anna Lindh, Denmark has lived with a constant threat of attacks since the Mohammed cartoon crisis, and Finland has suffered two large-scale school shootings.

For a long time, it has seemed that Norway had avoided the fate of its neighbours, but when rightwing extremist Anders Behring Breivik on July 22 first bombed government offices in Oslo before going on a shooting rampage at a Labour Party youth camp, killing in all 77 people, the Scandinavian country in turn shed its sheltered innocence.

"There will be a before and after July 22," acknowledged Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, who has created an independent commission to draw up a report on the lessons that must be learned from the massacre.

"The map has been ripped, the compass is broken," he told parliament on Monday.

After 10 days of national unity and vows to maintain an open and free society in honour of the mostly teenaged victims, the debate in Norway is moving towards an examination of whether

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change is inevitable.

"New security measures will surely be implemented. Norwegians will likely no longer meet government ministers skiing in the woods or pass them on the pavements of Oslo's streets," Kristian Berg Harpviken, the head of the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), wrote in a report late last week.

"There will be a strong temptation to close off streets, to erect walls and fences, and to establish airport-like security measures at the entrances of public buildings," he added, warning though that "we know the cost of such measures."

Everywhere you go you can hear Norwegians insisting that changing too much, increasing security and limiting freedom would only be to give in to Behring Breivik's hateful logic.

But while Stoltenberg's motto since the beginning, of "more openness, more democracy, more humanity, but no more naivety," has been widely popular, it is beginning to reach its limits, observers say.

"Regardless of how much we talk about democracy, openness and the fact that we should carry on as before, Norway will be forced to protect itself better against tormented 'losers' with evil intentions," the Verdens Gang daily wrote in an editorial Monday.

The paper also published a poll showing that 65 percent of Norwegians think the country's penalties for serious crimes -- prison sentences in practice do not surpass 21 years -- are too weak.

A growing number of Norwegians also favour more domestic surveillance and intelligence gathering, according to the poll.

At the same time however, the survey showed that a quarter of those questioned had since the

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attacks grown more positive to the "multicultural" society Behring Breivik declared war on in his self-proclaimed "crusade" against a "Muslim invasion" of Europe.

In a country that over the past decade has seen the populist and anti-immigration rightwing Progress Party grow to become the second largest party, Norwegians of all ethnic origins and backgrounds have shown impressive signs of unity and solidarity since the attacks.

Veiled women of Somali origin have helped light candles in Oslo cathedral, the prime minister visited a mosque for Friday prayers and the first funeral for an attack victim included both Protestant and Muslim ceremonies.

According to Ann-Helen Bay, head of Oslo's Institute for Social Research, the biggest changes in the wake of the attacks will be in the political debate, especially with regard to immigration.

"The polarisation will be weaker. This should lead to some kind of reconciliation and maybe to increased tolerance on both sides," she told AFP.

"More interaction, tolerance and open-minded attitude can be expected," she said, but stressed: "We know from previous dramatic events that after some months things may go back to how they were before."

Berg Harpviken of PRIO meanwhile insisted on the need to resist allowing fear to determine how Norway allows the attacks to change it.

"The very best protection against future acts of terrorism in Norway will involve maintaining the openness and trust that characterises Norwegian society and government," he wrote.

"The vision of total security is not just an impossible vision: it may also be one that undermines the very nature of the type of society we seek to defend."