

No mere campus shooting can rattle Moscow

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You can be reasonably certain when the University of Idaho and Moscow Police will not trigger an alert:

When someone fires a gun at a dormitory.

When he flees the scene.

And when for hours, if not days, nobody knows where he is - or who he is.

So it went Sunday.

Somebody fired a .45-caliber gun at Targhee Fine Arts Hall, a small dormitory filled with art and architecture students. A bullet crashed through a window, struck a ceiling fixture and then bounced back down into a cinder block wall. Miraculously, it intercepted no human along the way.

Cops collected a spent casing.

They got a witness description of a white sport utility vehicle - possibly a Ford Bronco - and two men.

In the aftermath of Virginia Tech or Columbine High School, it's not difficult to imagine what the response would be elsewhere.

Through voice mails, computers and tablets, students, staff and faculty would be advised to take shelter.

Through public statements, local police would arm ordinary citizens with facts, enabling them to protect themselves.

After two or three hours, they'd issue an all-clear.

It's the ethical thing to do.

It's the pragmatic thing to do. By issuing a description of the vehicle, cops could rely on ordinary citizens to become their extended eyes and ears. Somebody might see the SUV and catch a license plate number.

It's the cautious thing to do. If nothing else, authorities have the opportunity to test the effectiveness of their emergency alert systems.

But not in Moscow.

"We concluded it was an isolated incident," a UI statement said.

Isolated incident?

Whether this shooting was a spontaneous prank or a more menacing message, it still points to someone capable of firing a gun at unsuspecting students and a culprit who remains at large.

It's not as if the UI and Moscow haven't had their share of warnings.

In August, former UI professor Ernesto Bustamante murdered graduate student Katy Benoit outside a Moscow apartment before speeding off in a rental car.

Armed with 11 weapons, a mentally unstable Bustamante may have trolled Moscow for 80 minutes before he checked in at the University Inn at 10 p.m. Police had no idea where he was until 1 a.m., when they located his rental car at the hotel's parking lot.

Only around midnight did Moscow Police issue a statement informing the public about the threat in their midst. And by the time the UI alerted its student body at 7 a.m. the next day, Bustamante had been dead more than an hour, killed by his own hand.

"We felt we pretty much had it contained," is how police Lt. Dave Lehmitz justified keeping citizens ignorant of the threat.

Contained?

Again, how would they know that?

Few communities in the United States have been touched by the kind of horrific rampage Jason Hamilton unleashed in 2007 by killing his wife and then firing his weapons at the Latah County Courthouse. Before committing suicide, Hamilton killed a Moscow police officer and a church caretaker, and wounded two more officers and a UI student.

Yet the UI and Moscow slumber on, content in the assurances that a possible drive-by shooting was "an isolated incident" and that a murder-suicide was "contained."

Makes you wonder: When would the UI activate its alert system? - M.T.