

A strange calamity

IT WAS PROBABLY no coincidence that the deadly rampage on Toronto's Yonge Street occurred on a sunny Monday afternoon that was in sharp contrast to the ice storm that hit Southern Ontario a week earlier.

If indeed, as authorities appear to agree, the rampage was deliberate and the driver intended to kill as many people as possible, the lovely spring weather had brought out many who last week would have stayed indoors.

As we see it, there's little doubt that it was an isolated event that had little to do with international terrorism, since the accused killer, Alek Minassian, is not known to have any links to radical Islam. In fact, those who know him say the 25-year-old Seneca College student was a computer whiz who was likely autistic and may not have known how to drive any vehicle, let alone the rented van.

Accordingly, one thing police will surely be checking out is whether it was the killer himself or someone else who rented the van, and how it was that he got behind the wheel and drove south from Richmond Hill, starting the carnage when he was well south of Steeles Ave. in the former borough of North York.

In mere minutes, the van traveled at speeds estimated to be between 60 and 70 km/h, killing at least 10 pedestrians and seriously injuring another 15, while mowing down everything else in its path and at one point crossing into the northbound lanes before somehow coming to rest on a side street.

It would seem there is little doubt that, whatever the motive, the inspiration was from similar incidents in Barcelona, Nice, London, Stockholm and New York City, most (but not all) of which were linked to Islamic terrorism. In all those incidents, a van was used as the perfect vehicular weapon.

Accordingly, the only precaution we can think of as applicable would involve close checking of any applications to rent vans ? perhaps a law that there be a waiting period between the application and the actual lease.

Thankfully, although the RCMP and OPP immediately became involved in the investigation, they did not overreact with a major security crackdown that would have escalated the situation and given the impression Toronto was facing a bigger threat. (Although police closed off the crime scene, the security was comparatively mild and most of the transit system kept operating.)

And unlike the similar incidents elsewhere, a courageous Toronto police officer faced down the driver and forced him to the ground without firing a shot, despite an apparent attempt by the suspect to commit ?suicide by cop? by brandishing what turned out to be a cell phone and asking the officer to ?shoot me in the head.?

As a result, police will be able to question the accused, and through the trial process there is every likelihood that the public will eventually learn what went on in the killer's head. As the Toronto Star's editorial board put it Tuesday, ?The driver is alive to face justice and, just as important for the public good, to give his own explanation of why he inflicted this horror.?

If the driver's motive was merely to attract attention, he surely succeeded. A check of websites Tuesday confirmed that the rampage got detailed coverage in major U.S. and British dailies as well as CNN and other cable news channels.

But in one CNN account a law enforcement analyst noted that in an entry in his Facebook account, ?Minassian lauded an American mass killer? who in 2014 killed six people and injured 14 others near the University of California's Santa Barbara campus before taking his own life.

?All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!?' read the message on the account believed to belong to the accused. The California killer was apparently motivated by a personal grievance related to an extremist ideological subculture of men's rights activists propagated in online forums.