

In US capital, numbing fear seeps in

Outdoor cafes sit empty as sniper attacks add to the region's lingering anxiety about terror.

By Dante Chinni

Sitting outside Starbucks and sipping lattes is no longer an option for many people in this city. And suddenly, the wait for treadmills at some area gyms is extra long – while lines at banks are especially short.

It's part of the newest "new normal" in the Washington, D.C., area, where a series of sniper shootings has kept residents on edge for the past nine days.

Already, this city had seen an influx of police barricades and newly visible anti-aircraft guns after Sept. 11. Now, the line between paranoia and precaution has gotten thinner. Starbucks "suspended" outdoor seating at 143 shops. Merchants bemoan their lack of customers. And outdoor runners are migrating into packed gyms.

Residents are grappling anew with fears of random violence. *"On the day of the first shootings, I had patients coming in saying they immediately felt the way they did on 9/11," says Anita Gadhia-Smith, a Washington therapist. "This sniper is reopening the wounds of vulnerability."*

The latest incident came Wednesday night – a gas station slaying in Manassas, Va., that, at press time, had not been definitively linked to the other attacks.

Washington has never been a particularly safe place – at least statistically. But there have always been wide swaths of the city where gun shots were practically unheard of. And many D.C. suburbs are among the most privileged – idyllic enclaves of upper-middle-class families and good schools. Since September 2001, though, the city known for its easy way of life has become a place of subdued tension.

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, using the city's subway system became a tricky task. People began to consider escape routes from town. Terror alerts had a special meaning here: On the drive past the Pentagon, roadside anti-aircraft missiles were nearly impossible to miss. Adding a sniper to the mix of perils in daily life here has put some people very much on edge.

Eric Sterling, president of the Criminal Justice Policy Foundation, moved the group's headquarters outside Washington after Sept. 11, in part to escape the danger of Washington life. But the group's new home in downtown Silver Spring, Md., is only minutes from several of the sniper's shooting scenes.

"Now walking down Georgia Avenue" where the sniper killed two, says Mr. Sterling, "I feel like it's a bit like Sarajevo." While he knows the comparison is exaggerated, Sterling says the sniper

story has hit him hard. "As an act of terrorism, it's very effective. There is a feeling that you are beyond the government's help." On Monday, when a 13-year-old boy was shot in Bowie, Md., Sterling ran to his car after noticing a spot that seemed a good place for a sniper to hide.

Ms. Gadhia-Smith says the attacks' randomness, their locations, even their times of day, leave people feeling helpless. "In some ways this is ... harder on people here than 9/11, because we don't know who's doing it and we don't know why. It's not us versus them. There is no 'them' here."

In the last week, it's become increasingly hard to call an action or a thought paranoid. For many, walking quickly to cars or glancing over shoulders feels not odd, but smart, considering the news. Since the alert that a white truck or van may be involved, people talk openly about how many white "box trucks" they see.

Still, for some, the sniper represents not so much something different, but a continuation of fear that's lingered since Sept. 11. Living in and around Washington carries certain risks, they say, but if you decide to stay here, you learn to cope.

At a subway entrance on Connecticut Avenue, Barbara Hirsch waits for a friend as darkness falls. "Is it on my mind? A little bit," she says. "I'm not going to go running down Rockville Pike" – a street the sniper has visited. "But in the basics, I'm not changing what I do."

In the end, she sees both the sniper and the terrorist attacks as random acts – though the current situation is more troubling. "At least with the terrorist attacks, by the end of the day we knew what had happened. The troubling aspect here is we don't know. This is a pathological person. We don't know when he'll strike next or why. That's frightening."