

ISA S Brief

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‘Ye Hai Mumbai Meri Jaan...’¹

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Abstract

The serial blasts of 13 July 2011 in Mumbai that shattered 31 months of relative peace in India have resulted in 18 deaths and 130 injured people. The renewal of terrorist attacks underline the revival and regrouping of those terrorist organisations who had been lying low under the international pressures and the promise of internal security revamping in the aftermath of the 26 November 2008 (26/11) cross-border terrorist attacks on Mumbai. The current blasts also expose major chinks in India’s internal security structure and point clearly to the fact that the lessons of 26/11 have not been learnt properly. While the investigating agencies are being cautious in identifying possible suspects, a more intriguing aspect of the blasts is that no terrorist group has claimed responsibility for them so far.

With these blasts India has entered a more serious and complex phase of threat from terror. With growing uncertainties in the Af-Pak region following the United States (US) drawdown of forces and erosion of the credibility of the Pakistani State, India should prepare itself to receive greater spill-over of regional terror. This terror may come well-packaged in the synergised operations of internal groups like Indian Mujahedeen’s and the external forces like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). India has no escape from a vigorous fortification of its internal security mechanisms on the lines demonstrated by the US post-9/11.

¹ ‘It is Mumbai my dear...’

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The old Mohammad Rafi's popular Bollywood number '*Aye Dil Mushkil Jeena Yahan, Zara Hat Ke, Zara Bach Ke, Ye Hai Bombay Meri Jaan...*' (Oh my heart, it is difficult to live here, remain somewhat apart, somewhat defensive, it is Bombay my dear!) is being brutalised by the terrorists to make Mumbai a really risky place to live. The terrorists seem to love Mumbai as they have subjected it to their repeated attacks since 1993. The latest attack on 13 July 2011 was the 14th in the series, with two major attacks taking place in 2006 (181 deaths) and 2008 (166 deaths). Mumbai is an attractive target of the terrorists because it enjoys a high political visibility, it is a hub of India's financial activity, a home to the world famous Bollywood, a popular den of the international mafia groups (like Dawood Ibrahim) and a society that lives with uneasy communal relations (between Hindus and Muslims as also between local Marathi and emigrants from other Indian states). In the latest attack, seven devices exploded in three highly populated places in the south of Mumbai – Zaveri Bazaar (centre of diamond trade), Opera House and Dadar. The serial blasts took place within a period of 12 minutes, killing 17 people and injuring 131 others, with 23 of them being in critical conditions.

For a government which is barely able to cope with the popular pressures on the issues of corruption, these terror attacks have come at a difficult time. They are a matter of additional concern on two counts. One is that they signal the regrouping and reassertion of terrorist forces in India. In doing so, the peace experienced in India, in general, and Mumbai, in particular, since the 26/11 mayhem in Mumbai, has been shattered. There were blasts in Pune, Chennai, Varanasi and Delhi in 2010, but they were of low intensity yielding minor casualties, except for the nine people killed in Pune at the German Bakery on 13 February 2010. It may not be out of place to recall here that a relative absence of cross-border terrorist attacks in India since 26/11 was being credited to Pakistan's own internal preoccupation with the growing Jihadi terror and international pressures on it to keep its India targeted extremists. Now these US pressures have been eased and/or defied, as a result of strategic dissonance resulting from the Abbottabad killing of Osama bin Laden. Could this have emboldened Jihadi outfits like the LeT in Pakistan and re-energised their confidence to revive anti-India cross-border operations? Some of the Pakistan-based extremists groups had vowed to wreck revenge for the Osama killing on not only Pakistan and the US but also India, due to India's support of the Abbottabad operations. Is 13/7 Mumbai an implementation of the part of that promise? India's investigating agencies will hopefully be looking into all these questions, while exploring other possibilities to identifying the culprits.

The second issue of concern to the Government of India and Maharashtra is that these attacks have exposed serious chinks in India's internal security arrangements. Telecast live by New Delhi Television (NDTV) on 14 July 2011, India's Home Minister, Mr P. Chidambaram's assertion in a press conference in Mumbai that there was no failure of intelligence, has come under strong criticism from media, analysts and the opposition parties. That assertion was

indeed untenable and a poor excuse to defend his own turf. He, in the same press conference, accepted that no specific intelligence was available with regard to these blasts, though the blasts were well planned and well coordinated, and also that all the three targeted places were marked 'sensitive'. Well if intelligence was not available, even for what is acknowledged as a case of well-planned and well-coordinated terror attack on acknowledged 'sensitive' places, than what is the worth of intelligence agencies? How have they improved their performance since 26/11?

There is no doubt that intelligence and security infrastructure has been revamped in post-26/11. National State Guard (NSG) units have been placed in all the metropolitan cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore and Kolkata. The National Intelligence Assessment (NIA) has also been put in place, allowing both the NSG and NIA to be at hand promptly in Mumbai after the blasts. But the revamping of the internal security structure still seems to be a work in progress. In the aftermath of 26/11, the establishment of two institutions were announced, namely the National Intelligence Grid and the National Counterterrorism Centre (NCTC). While the National Intelligence Grid has been approved (only in June 2011), NCTC appears to have been almost abandoned. Even the approved National Intelligence Grid is weaker than initially proposed, as it will not have access to Financial Intelligence Unit. There are obvious turf wars between various ministries and agencies, keeping the much emphasised concept of 'centralised intelligence sharing a non-starter'.³ The recommendations of the Ram Pradhan Committee, appointed to probe state's response to 26/11 terror attacks, have only been partially accepted and implemented. For instance, it had asked for 5,000 close circuit TV (CCTV) cameras to be installed at sensitive places around Mumbai and a great amount of other technological upgrading to reinforce security infrastructure. Though the 13/7 targets had CCTV cameras, the full completion of these recommendations have been held up in debates of procurement procedures and changing technological parameters of the instruments. There are also other organisational and political aspects that have not been taken onboard, as of yet, by the authorities.⁴

A closer look at the explosives used and triggering devices employed points towards the involvement of Indian Mujahideen (IM), as the perpetrators of this crime. But if IM is involved, its links with the LeT of Pakistan and Al-Qaeda are well known. The Indian intelligence had monitored a conversation, some time back, involving the IM, wherein the emphasis was laid on using unknown operatives. Perhaps the operation was planned and packaged outside Mumbai, to keep it secret. There was a general alert issued, on that basis, to various agencies in Mumbai. Maharashtra Chief Minister Chavan had admitted that the Anti-Terrorist Squad of Maharashtra received about 150 intelligence inputs that could be linked to these blasts, but they all were of a general nature without any specific or actionable

³ *The Hindustan Times* (15 July 2011).

⁴ Maharashtra Chief Minister, Prithvi Raj Chavan, admitted this in his exclusive interview with NDTV 15 July 2011.

intelligence involved.⁵ It is clear from the available facts that while the intelligence agencies have failed to penetrate the IM or other terrorist groups, those groups have carefully developed a necessary sophistication to dodge the agencies. On the basis of available leads, the police are now also tracking any links with the Students Islamic Movement of India to ensure what role in any they played.

The Government has set up a number of task forces to track the 13/7 Mumbai blasts. None of the hostile groups are being ruled out from these investigations. There were speculations that even Naxal groups may be involved in the act, as they want to expand their reach to urban areas and two of their operatives were nabbed by Mumbai police only a few days prior to the attacks. The Naxals, claiming to be an ideologically oriented political group, are expected to avoid attacking innocent unarmed people. But this is not necessarily a reality. Some of the recent train accidents that killed innocent people are suspected to be the result of the Naxal groups' acts of sabotage. Therefore, nothing must be ruled out. No terrorist group has so far claimed responsibility for the blasts, nor has the Government named any suspect, prime or otherwise.

The caution being observed by the Government, in not naming any suspects until a thorough investigation is carried out, is well deserved. On earlier occasions, hasty pointers toward cross-border terrorist groups had to be subsequently revised, such as the case of the Samjhauta Express bombing in February 2007. Recently, there have been reports indicating that Al-Qaeda played a leading role in initiating the 26/11 terror project, as they wanted to divert the Pakistani forces from operations along the border with Afghanistan, by provoking India-Pakistan tensions. For this, Al Qaeda employed the LeT, an Inter-Services Intelligence patronised Jihadi outfit. The possibility of 13/7 being staged by similar forces is very much there. There could be many reasons for this. India is labelled as one of their adversaries, especially as it is seen to be an ally of the US in the global fight against terror. Driven by their hostility towards India and also towards the present political and even military establishment in Pakistan, these groups may also have been provoked by the feeble but definite indications of improvement in India-Pakistan relations, since the breakthrough meeting of the Indian and Pakistani Prime Ministers during the Mohali cricket test on 30 March 2011. The foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan had a very positive meeting on 23–24 June 2011 and the foreign ministers of the two countries are scheduled to meet on 27 July 2011. The foreign secretaries have discussed issues of peace and security, and explored confidence building measures (including the nuclear and missile fields). These discussions are likely to be carried forward by the foreign ministers. The Indian Foreign Secretary, Mrs Nirupama Rao, publicly acknowledged that there was a welcome change in Pakistan's attitude towards terrorism.⁶ Earlier in March and April 2011, at the foreign secretaries meeting, the Home and the Commerce Secretaries of the two countries also had positive

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *The Hindustan Times* (3 July 2011).

meetings. The Home Secretaries covered a wide range of issues from 26/11 investigations to drug trafficking, coastal security and exchange of prisoners.⁷ The Commerce Secretaries meeting resulted in Pakistan's grant of Most Favoured Nation's (MFN) treatment to India in bilateral trade relations.⁸ This was a radical departure from the traditional Pakistani position, which had linked the issues of Kashmir and 'non-tariff barriers' to the grant of MFN status.

If the latest terror attack on Mumbai was aimed at disturbing the positive movement in India-Pakistan relations, it will not succeed. Pakistani leaders, from the President down to the Home and Foreign Ministers have denounced the Mumbai attack. In India, both Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna and Home Minister Chidambaram have publicly declared that the scheduled talks between India and Pakistan at the foreign minister level will take place.⁹ Chidambaram assured that this dimension – that the blasts were aimed at derailing India-Pakistan relations – is being taken into account by investigators.¹⁰ The Indian Prime Minister's cricket diplomacy, inviting his Pakistani counterpart to witness the Mohali Test, was a clear indication that while India would continue to seek Pakistani support in curbing cross-border terrorism, this menace would not be allowed to disrupt constructive engagement between the two countries in the areas of economic cooperation, peace and security.

In the months and years to come, India will have to watch out for acts of terrorism against its people. Today it is Mumbai, tomorrow it could be any other city. The challenge of terrorism will increasingly become stronger and more complicated as India is caught between the persisting internal insurgencies and hardened cross-border extremist groups. The latter will become more assertive and aggressive with the spectre of uncertainty and instability in neighbouring Pakistan and Afghanistan, resulting from the winding down of US forces and an international security presence. While the use of international diplomacy to mobilise counter-terrorism efforts collectively will help, the real answer lies in the strengthening of internal security structures and efficiencies. India's internal security agencies will have to become apt not only in post-terror investigations and mopping operations, but in isolating the terrorist groups and pre-empting their operations. There still exists a wide gap between the promise of security and the performance of security apparatus. India would also do well to move fast on engaging and reintegrating the internal insurgencies be they in Kashmir, the northeast or of the left extremist variety, so as to deal resolutely and firmly with the cross-border terrorist menace which is expected to become more determined and formidable. It remains to be seen if India's democratic polity, its flabby bureaucracy and turf conscious

⁷ For the joint statement issued on 29 March 2011 after the meeting, see, 'Joint Statement following India-Pakistan Home/Interior Secretary level talks', *Ministry of External Affairs India* (29 March 2011), <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530517483>. Accessed on 18 July 2011.

⁸ See *Dawn* (28 April 2011), *Pakistan Observer* (15 July 2011) and *The Hindu* (11 July 2011).

⁹ *The Indian Express* (14 July 2011).

¹⁰ The press conference was covered live by NDTV on 14 July 2011. See 'Mumbai blasts: All hostile groups on probe radar', *Express Buzz* (14 July 2011), <http://expressbuzz.com/nation/mumbai-blasts-all-hostile-groups-on-probe-radar/294150.html>. Accessed on 18 July 2011.

security agencies will be able to rise to the challenge.

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