

ISAS Brief

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The Mumbai Mayhem: The Global War on Terror comes to India

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India went through its worst terror attack in Mumbai last week. With unprecedented sweep and speed, the terrorists attacked 10 different locations and then settled down in three iconic buildings – the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, Hotel Trident-Oberoi and the Nariman House (a Jewish Community House) – for wanton killings and pitched battles. The grit and doggedness with which the terrorists fought, and the range of arms, ammunition and explosives with which they were equipped, underlined months of careful preparations. Interrogations of the captured terrorist have revealed details of the terrorists' entry into Mumbai through the sea route from Karachi. They had plans to blow up the Taj Hotel before possible escape. There is still confusion about the actual number of terrorists that came from outside as they came in batches. More than 10 have been shot dead and one arrested. Some of them checked into the Taj Hotel on 22 November 2008 and occupied Room No. 630, where not only additional explosives and arms were stored with the help of local associates (sleeping cells and underworld contacts) but a control room was also set up for the operations. They had complete and precise reconnaissance of the three major sites. India's National Security Guard (NSG) commandos who launched the counter operations admitted that the terrorists appeared to be fully familiar with the hotel's layout and they were as well trained and determined as the commandos.

It took India's elite NSG commandos nearly 48 hours of intense encounters to clear the sites of the terrorists. Besides the NSG, almost all other components of India's security forces, the police, army (Rapid Action Force), navy (naval commandos) and the air force (helicopter units), battled the terrorists for 60 long hours in all. The terrorists had instructions to kill up to 5,000 people and to "kill till your last breath". At the end of these operations, there were high casualty figures, with nearly 200 people dead and over 300 injured. Nearly 600 people were rescued from the terrorists' hold-up. The dead included more than 20 foreigners (five Israelis, five Americans, three Germans, two Greeks, a Japanese, a Canadian, an Australian, a Malaysian and a Singaporean), 14 police officers, including four senior Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) officers and at least two NSG commandos. The dead also included the families of the General Manager of the Taj Hotel (his wife and two sons) and the manager of the Nariman House (Rabbi and his wife, Rivka). These figures may be revised after the final mopping up of all the sites.

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The terrorists called themselves ‘Deccan Mujahedeen’, largely to camouflage their real identity. The interception of their conversations revealed that they spoke a mix of Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi. According to Mumbai police, the arrested terrorist has admitted that he was trained by Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), an extremist *jehadi* outfit in Pakistan, established during the 1980s by Osama bin Laden. Though banned in Pakistan after 2001, LeT continues to operate under the name of Jamat-ul-Dawa. It is believed to be operating not only in Pakistan and occupied Kashmir, but also in Afghanistan, Iraq, Central Asia and Africa.

The terrorists in the Mumbai attack carried fake identity cards of British, Mauritius and other nationalities to cover their real identities, though the possibility of LeT having separatist Kashmiris, alienated Indian Muslims and British or Pakistani origin as recruits cannot be ruled out. There is also a strong possibility that their operations were supported by local groups and Mumbai’s underworld. There is no dearth of Mumbai’s underworld don Dawood Ibrahim’s associates (the D-Company) offering possible help, though Dawood himself lives in Karachi and Dubai with protection from the respective establishments. He was the mastermind of Mumbai’s 1993 riots. The Indian government has, for long, been requesting Pakistan to hand over Dawood but without any success. The terrorists’ Mumbai operations were patterned on previous LeT-blessed *Fidayeen* attacks in Kashmir and the attacks in 2001 (the Indian Parliament), in 2002 (the Akshardham Temple in Gujarat), in 2005 (Ayodhya) and in 2006 (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh headquarters in Nagpur). As in the case in Mumbai, the terrorists carried dry fruits for their sustenance and had shown the propensity for fighting a coordinated pitched battle with the security forces. This is unlike usual terrorist acts of killing through suicide and other explosions. The imprint of Al-Qaeda training and motivation were also clearly evident in the Mumbai attack.

The Mumbai attack was different from other acts of terrorism in India so far in that it focussed on foreigners. In Mumbai, the attackers primarily targeted Americans, British and Israelis. The two hotels were chosen as they are frequented by foreigners. The siege on Nariman House, and the killing of Jews and Israelis there, as in the case of Trident-Oberoi, clearly point towards Al-Qaeda links to the attack. The e-mail (the origin of which has now been traced to Pakistan) sent on behalf of the terrorists in the name of ‘Deccan Mujahedeen’ underlined two objectives: (a) “India should drop its atrocities on Muslims...”; and (b) “the proof of atrocities on Muslims is evident in Iraq, Afghanistan and ...Kashmir...” One of the escapee hostages from Nariman House quoted the terrorists as saying that, the “Indian army should withdraw from Kashmir and let Shariah law prevail in Muslim-dominated regions...” These are the leads to suggest the role of LeT-Al-Qaeda combined.

Behind the rhetoric of Kashmir, Shariah, Iraq and Afghanistan, the Mumbai attack seems to have been driven by two broader sets of objectives, namely, of hurting India and harming India-Pakistan political understanding. India’s rising profile as a power of economic and political consequence in world affairs has not been palatable to some extremist sections in Pakistan. LeT’s supreme leader Hafiz Mohammad Saeed’s statements on 6 and 19 October 2008 before senior Lashkar leaders may be recalled where he poured venom against India and signalled that “the only language India understands is that of force, and that is the language it must be talked to in.” India’s vulnerability to terrorism and its incapacity to ensure internal security and stability can seriously erode investor confidence and subdue its growth dynamism. India’s travel and tourism sectors have already started feeling the pinch of the Mumbai attack, with some western countries issuing travel advisories to their citizens. However, if India is seen to be able to deal with the aftermath of this terrorist attack firmly, it may be able to overcome the long-term damage to its economic strength and prospects, as

suggested by the owner of the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel and India's top industrialist, Ratan Tata.

The attack could also have been aimed at weakening India's political stability by vitiating its sensitive communal situation and exploiting the creeping alienation of the Muslim minority. There are disturbing reports of alienated Indian Muslims joining Al-Qaeda ranks to fight against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces in Afghanistan. Some Indian analysts trace the beginning of Indian Muslims' alienation to the demolition of Babri Mosque (1992, Ayodhya) and claim that a Muslim activist from Hyderabad, Abu Abdel Aziz 'Barbaros', had then established links with organisations such as Al-Qaeda and LeT. Incidents of communal violence in Gujarat and elsewhere have subsequently reinforced such links. It is also pointed out that security searches and indiscriminate harassment of the Muslim community following terrorist incidents on the one hand, and growing violence of 'Hindu terrorists' against Muslims in India on the other, have also alienated a number of young Muslims, particularly in Muslim-dominated cities such as Hyderabad. This, if at all, could be the rationale behind the rise of groups such as 'Indian Mujahideen'. The use of 'Deccan Mujahideen' as a cover by the Mumbai attackers was perhaps to lure alienated Indian Muslims towards building and/or further reinforcing Indian chapters of Al-Qaeda, LeT and other such extremist outfits. The challenge before India lies in insulating its society and polity from the spillover of the 'global war on terror' raging in Afghanistan.

If the objective of the attack on Mumbai were to widen the communal divide in India, its effect has just been the opposite. The sacrifice of the ATS Chief of Mumbai, Hemant Karkare, in chasing the terrorists on 26 November 2008 has brought praise for him from his Hindu fundamentalist detractors who have been criticising him for his probe against the "Hindu terrorists" involved in the Malegaon attacks. The entire police operations against the terrorists in Mumbai have been led by a Muslim officer, Hussain Gafoor. Anti-Muslim organisations such as the Shiv Sena remained quiet during the terror attack and there were no communal incidents in Mumbai triggered by this attack. The attack may have made some impact on the in-progress elections for a number of state assemblies to the disadvantage of the Congress Party which is in power both at the centre and in Maharashtra (with Mumbai as its capital). However, the general popular reaction has been against the politicians' attempts to 'politicise terror' for electoral purposes. If the Congress Party's prospects in the forthcoming national elections are adversely affected and result in the unseating of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the organisers of the Mumbai attack could derive the satisfaction of having punished him for his policy of taking India strategically closer to the United States.

The second set of the terrorists' goals may be to reverse the positive trend in India-Pakistan relations, particularly in the context of a democratic government in Islamabad. A Pakistani scholar, Dr Moonis Ahmer, has boldly said that the attack "...is a well thought-out conspiracy to destabilise relations between the two countries". Another London-based Pakistani analyst, Farzana Shaikh, reinforces this assumption by saying, "If we find that indeed there was some section of the Pakistani society involved in either planning or orchestrating this attack in Mumbai, it would be a very very serious matter and certainly one which could possibly bring the two countries back to the brink of war." The question of the Mumbai attack having Pakistani roots has been raised by the Indian government. While Prime Minister Singh described the terrorists as "foreign based", Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee has blamed the involvement of "elements from Pakistan" in the Mumbai attack. Indian leaders have been cautious in avoiding any direct reference to the involvement of the Pakistan government yet. However, India has asked Pakistan to send the chief of its military

intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), to India to share information on terrorism-related issues. The Indian assumption is that there are elements in Pakistan which are beyond the control of its new democratic government and these have a vested interest in creating mischief. The responses of the Pakistani government have also been cautious and positive so far. President Asif Ali Zardari, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani and Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi have shown their willingness to help India in the investigations and have assured India that “any Pakistani group if found involved in the Mumbai attack will be dealt with seriously”. It may however, be noted that, on the advice of the Pakistan Army Chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, President Zardari has decided to send a junior ISI officer to India, as opposed to his initial decision of sending the ISI chief. This resistance from sections of the Pakistani establishment is aimed at ensuring that Pakistan is not seen as yielding to pressure from India. They may also not be fully in favour of reigning in extremist elements as instruments to keep India contained.

While both the Indian and Pakistani sides are carefully trying to avoid precipitate actions, the situation is sensitive and New Delhi is under increasing pressure to show firm action against the perpetrators of terrorism. If New Delhi is provoked and pushed by the consequences of the terrorists’ act to create heat on Pakistan’s eastern border, it would yield a rationale for Pakistan’s security forces to divert attention and deployment, at least partly, from the Afghanistan border. Such heat can be created in many ways. One may recall the deployment of Indian forces on the Pakistan border under ‘Operation Parakram’ during the previous National Democratic Alliance regime following the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001. Alternately India may decide to hit at terrorist establishments across the Line of Control. This would jeopardise the United States’ ‘war on global terror’ in Afghanistan and delight Al-Qaeda and Taliban forces as well as the extremist *jehadi* organisations of Pakistan. Voices have started rising from Pakistan Taliban-dominated tribal lords that they are prepared to fight on the eastern front against India if military action in their areas are put on hold. Such a diversion, or even the cooling down of India-Pakistan peace process, will also be cheered by sections of the Pakistan army and the defunct political wing of the ISI, which have never endorsed either Pakistan fighting ‘the American War’ in Afghanistan or improving its relations with India at the cost of the ‘Kashmir issue’. These sections may be looking forward to the prospects of activating the ‘Kashmir issue’ in India-Pakistan relations in the context of a new United States administration which may not be averse to getting re-involved in the Kashmir dispute between the two South Asian neighbours to ensure the viability of its reinforced strategy in Afghanistan. The deep interest shown by United States President-elect, Barrack Obama, in the Mumbai terror attack is reflective of these concerns. Extremist elements in Pakistan would be happy if increased United States involvement becomes a new source of tension between India and the United States.

India has a habit of learning through shocks and humiliations. The reflection of this shock is the resignations of Home Minister, Shivraj Patil, and National Security Adviser, M. K. Narayanan. Some more heads in the Ministry of Home Affairs, intelligence establishments and the Maharashtra state government may roll. The Mumbai attack has exposed intelligence and security vulnerabilities of the Indian state. It has triggered a blame game between political and administrative decision makers on the one hand, and the role of the intelligence agencies on the other. The poor equipment and agility of the initial security response to such serious contingencies have also been exposed. It is hoped that the Mumbai attack would prove to be a watershed in revamping and tightening anti-terror mechanisms of the Indian state. In the wake of the Mumbai attack, the Indian people have also strongly and angrily reacted to the pathology of the political class in exploiting anything and everything that

comes their way – from caste and religion to terror – for their immediate electoral gains. This may seem to be inevitable in a competitive democracy but the politicians would do better to identify some issues of national priority, such as fighting against terrorism, and ensuring the security of ordinary people, where they would shun playing politics. That would be the best tribute India’s political class can pay to the dead in the Mumbai mayhem.

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