Terror Trends: Mega Cities, Maximum Impact

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The security environment of India is in a critical phase, repeatedly challenged by terrorism, with outfits operating out of Pakistan continuing to be highly active and finding new and unexpected targets. Trend analyses over the years indicate that the targets, motives and operatives have changed. Terrorist attacks are no more targeted mainly at security forces and government establishments, but have expanded to include strikes against India's economic and strategic assets.

The metropolis has become the prime terror target – a trend noticeable around the world. Terror attacks on big cities with its identifiable landmarks, its heterogenous mix of citizens make the maximum public and media impact. As 9/11 showed, they create a visual spectacle that gets engraved in public memory. City- based media and 24x7 news channels ensure immediate coverage. For terrorists, terror after all needs to be watched and the resultant chaos and panic is a measurement of the success of their acts. From New York to Madrid to London and Mumbai, urban terror has become a major trend – bigger the city, greater the fallout. A new pattern of attacks on commuter and mass transport system has also emerged. In March 2004, Madrid's train network was hit by a series of explosions at the rush hour. In all 191 people were killed and over 1700 wounded. In July 2005, a series of coordinated bomb blasts struck London's underground rail during the morning rush hour, killing 38 people. The Mumbai serial blasts on July 11, 2006 (7/11) followed similar pattern except that the 'rush-hour' in this case was in the evening. Terror follows a path and tends to repeat itself. The 1993 Bombay serial bomb blasts that targeted the Stock Exchange and other busy areas such as markets killing 257 people, the Sarin gas attack in Tokyo's subway in March 1995 that left 565 people hospitalized, and the initial attack on the World Trade Centre in New York in 1993 had already set the benchmark for urban terror.

In the past few years, India has witnessed a series of terrorist attacks on its major cities, including the 7/11 Mumbai serial blasts. In Delhi, some of the major attacks were the May 22, 2005 blast in two cinema halls, the October 29 serial blasts and the twin blasts at Jama Masjid on April 14, 2006. Subsequently, there was an attack on the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore. Since 2005, 273 people have been killed, including five terrorists and 268 civilians, and many more injured and properties wrecked in such attacks on the Indian metropolises .[1]

In the following segment we look at the nature of the recent spate of terrorist attacks in some of the mega cities in India, including the tactics being employed by the terrorists and the counter-measures of the state.

Mumbai

The 7/11 serial blasts in the suburban trains in Mumbai, which left 200 dead and 700 injured, was the deadliest terrorist attack in India in recent years. Earlier on August 25, 2003 twin blasts at the Gateway of India and Zaveri Bazar caused 50 deaths and injured 150 civilians. The 7/11 attack were well planned, coordinated and engineered between 6.24 pm and 6.35 pm during peak-hour when office-goers were returning home. It was clearly intended to create panic in India's financial capital (Mumbai) with resulting cascading effect on the economy.

Though no known group claimed responsibility for the attacks, on October 1, 2006 Mumbai police commissioner A N Roy revealed that the plot was executed by 11 Pakistanis and seven locals. He identified the ISI as being the mastermind of the 7/11 terror attacks with the help of Pakistan-based terrorist outfits LeT and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) associating local SIMI members. Nine of the Pakistanis involved managed to escape, one was missing and another called Mohammed Ali alias Abu Osama was killed in encounter by ATS on August 22 at Antop Hill, Mumbai.[2] Some 21 people were arrested from different parts of the country within days in connection with the incident,[3] however the figure was later reduced to 15, according to the heads of the ATS, IGP K P Raghuvanshi.[4] One of them, arrested from J&K on August 23, 2006, during questioning claimed that 17 members of the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) were involved in carrying out the attacks, of which 16 have returned back safely and one went missing.[5] The missing terrorist Salim, who probably was not able to

get off the train in time, was finally identified among the dead in the train bomb blast at Mahim. The police investigations have also identified the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) as being involved with the LeT in executing the attacks. SIMI, a banned organisation since 2001, has a strong network across India and in recent years has become a principal ally of almost all major Islamist terrorist groups. The Railway Police and Mumbai's Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) were able to arrest a number of suspects and the Mumbai police finally on October 1, stated that it had got to the root of the entire chain of events and those involved.

Delhi

Since 1997, Delhi has witnessed 26 major bomb blasts killing in all 92 people and injuring more than 600.[6] Among the incidents, the 10/29 (2005) blasts, was the most serious – killing 62 persons and injuring 155. The explosion occurred almost simultaneously at two busy market places in Delhi and one in a Delhi Transport Cooperation bus. This was the first high-intensity incident since the December 13, 2001 attack on the Parliament in which 11 were killed and 30 injured. Investigators later found the attack was jointly executed by the Pakistan-based LeT and JeM.[7] In another incident on May 22, 2005 the twin blast at Liberty and Satyam Cinema injured at least 70 persons and killed one. It was triggered by the Babbar Khalsa International (BKI) in protest against the movie, *Jo Bole So Nihaal* (a Sikh war cry) meaning, "Blessed is the one".[8] Subsequently, 13 people were injured in two low-intensity explosions that took place inside the Jama Masjid when the devout were offering prayers on April 14, 2006.

On March 5, 2005 three LeT terrorist were killed in South West Delhi. Two Jaish-e-Mohammed, four Hizb-ul-Mujahideen and 17 BKI were arrested in the same year. Subsequently, three prominent LeT members were also arrested, including Abu Razak Masood who is reported to be the outfit's coordinator in Dubai. In the following year (2006), eight LeT members and five BKI operatives were arrested from different places within the city. In addition, two suspected LeT terrorists were killed in encounter with the police in the Northwest of the city. With the help of intelligence, Delhi police had also seized illegal arms and ammunition like RDX, timers, detonators, rifles, rounds of ammunition, etc., from different terrorist hideouts.

Bangalore

The terrorist attack in the IISc campus in Bangalore on December 28, 2005 points to a departure from the earlier terrorist approach of targeting security forces personnel and common civilians. In this case, scientists and scholars were the targets. The attack took place in the middle of an International Conference organized by the Operational Research Society of India. A professor was killed and five persons were injured when an unidentified gunman opened fire and lobbed grenades in the IISc campus.[9] The attack, as later revealed, was carried out by a LeT member, who was also the outfit's south Indian commander, Abdul Rehman. He was subsequently arrested.[10] The terrorist motive in this case was to target the Indian IT industry and instill fear in the scientific community and research institutes.

Analysis

The quantity of illegal arms and explosives seized from the different centres and groups indicate that terrorists are sufficiently equipped to strike terror in big cities. The targets have also been expanded to important strategic locations. The National Security Advisor M K Narayanan stated on July 28, 2006 that there was a serious threat from the LeT to nuclear installations in the country.[11] Consequently, security has been tightened at the Kaiga nuclear power plant in Karnataka as well as at Kalpakkam. In fact, LeT's plan to blast reservoirs and power installation in Karnataka was revealed when a terrorist (Habeeb from Almatti, Bagalkot district) was arrested on January 15, 2006.[12] On March 6, last year a Delhi-based LeT cell was eliminated that hatched a plot to attack a series of IT centres of India in connivance with the banned SIMI.[13] All these indicate an expanding terrorist network in the southern part of the country and the targeting of the symbols of 'emerging India' – the IT sector, scientific establishments and nuclear power plants. The arrested terrorists were also planning to attack the Indian Military Academy (IMA) in Dehradun.

The LeT groups with their wide network have considerable presence in most of the metropolis. Recently, on February 1, 2006, a LeT module was busted in Kolkata and plans of a possible strike in the metropolis were uncovered.[14] Unlike the security forces, bustling cities with its on-the-move populace are easy targets. Since the LeT's network in India is widely spread;

future targets are possible in places like Information Technology (IT) hubs, Business Processing Organisations (BPO), in particular the Call Centres, tourist centres, hotels, market areas or shopping malls, and places of worship. Hence IT firms in Bangalore, Hyderabad, Cochin, Chennai, Coimbatore, Gurgaon and Pune have to be taken as high security risk zones.[15] Also, BPOs in metropolises need more safeguards against threats such cyber crime. In fact, in the last few years, the security agencies have lodged several cases under the IT Act 2000 and Indian Penal code provisions.[16]

Trend analysis also reveals that terrorist outfits like the LeT and JeM create bogus (new) groups to hide their real identity after an attack. After 7/11 a claim was on e-mail by a new group with links to the LeT called Lashkar-e-Qahar. After the October 2005 Delhi serial blasts, a hitherto unknown outfit, Inquilabi (Revolutionary) Group claimed responsibility and warned of more such attacks in future unless India stopped its "oppressive and hideous measures" in J&K.[17] Arrests and investigations by the Delhi Police, however, revealed that the terrorists involved in the attack were none other than members of LeT. Similarly, in the Varanasi terrorist attack case on January 7, 2006, the JeM attempted to throw sleuths off their trail by putting up a fictitious group, Lashkar-e-Qaharby to claim responsibility of the bomb blast at a railway station.[18]

It has been claimed that the Mumbai serial blasts was direct fallout of the Gujarat riots in 2002.[19] Interestingly, the majority victims of any urban terror are non-Muslim civilians. In contrast, the twin blasts of Jama Masjid were low intensity resulting in a few injured. The Jama Masjid incident clearly outlines the terrorist outfits' design to stoke communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims and not target the Muslims *per se*. Not surprisingly, the second blast occurred 15 minutes after the first by when all the devout had been evacuated.

Metro terror has become an exclusive domain of terrorists of Islamic identity such as the LeT and JeM. Insurgents from the Northeast or the left-wing extremists such as the Naxalites rarely operate in or attack metropolitan centres. Intelligence agencies will be increasingly challenged to trace the local support bases without which urban terror cannot exist.[20] It is clear that terrorist organizations are recruiting disgruntled urban youth and with the support of groups such as the SIMI are expanding their

networks and operations. A large influx of migrants from Bangladesh to metros in India is also of concern and needs to be checked and closely monitored. Head hunting of terrorists may not succeed in curbing terror in metros. Indeed, the state apparatus needs to educate the local populations about terrorism and way it is being carried out while simultaneously enhancing intelligence on their activities. Cities also urgently need to invest in redesigning market places, transport hubs, housing estates, and major institutions with security in focus.

References/End Notes

[1]   Data basically calculated from casualties provided by various open sources especially www.satp.org

[2]   "LeT, JeM, SIMI Helped Put Plan Into Action", October 1, 2006.

[3]   "2 LeT men arrested in J&K", *The Times of India*, August 28, 2006.

[4]   "Police search for SIMI man". *The Times of India*, October 1, 2006.

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[6]   Data calculated from the figure provided at "Bomb Blasts in Delhi, 1997-2005", at http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/database/delhi_blast.htm.

[7]   See "Press Release on December 18, 2001, statement made by Honerable Home Minister L K Advani at http://www.hciottawa.ca/news/pr/pr-011218.html

[8]   See "Jo Bole So Nihaal", at http://www.answers.com/topic/jo-bole-so-nihaal.

[9]   "Scientist killed as gunman opens fire in Bangalore", http://www.hindu.com/2005/12/29/stories/2005122919810100.htm.

[10] "LeT operative arrested in Bangalore for IISc attack", at http://in.rediff.com/news/2006/jan/03bang.htm

[11] "India Timeline-Year 2006", at http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/timeline/index.html

[12] Ibid.

[13] Sudhir Saxena, "The Rise of Fiscal Terror", at http://idsa.in/publications/stratcomments/sudhirsaxena250305.htm.

[14] "Police bust Lashkar module in Kolkata". *The Times of India*, February 2, 2006.

[15] See "Pune's booming IT parks sector", at http://www.ibef.org artdisplay.aspx?cat_ id=194&art_id=12036

[16] See "Cyber crime under-reported, BPOs need more safeguards", *The Times of India*, April 27, 2005.

[17] " Unknown militant group claims for Delhi blasts", BBC, October 31, 2005.

[18] See "Jaish creates Qahar: Cop See Through Terror Group's Red Herring", *The Times of India*, March 10, 2006.

[19] See "AGujarati Connection", at http://www.sepiamutiny.com/sepia/archives/ 003571.html.

[20] "Terrorist helped by locals", *The Times of India*, January 26, 2006.

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