

WORLD

New template for terror?

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1

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Sixty hours in Mumbai have begun to change the calculus of global terrorism.

New reports suggest that both Indian and American intelligence agencies had foreseen the threat to Mumbai (formerly Bombay). Yet the manner of the attack - with 10 heavily armed, highly trained fighters clinically fanning out across the city - meant that no "police force anywhere would have been prepared to counter this type of operation," says Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism analyst at Georgetown University in Washington.

Armed sieges are not a new terrorist tactic, but never before has one been used to such effect. Some experts suggest this could be the most sophisticated terrorist attack since 9/11. Now, other militants might consider copycat operations - and the world's cities will have to be ready for them.

"It was not so much of a success in terms of people killed - it was more the publicity they got for three days, and their ability to project the Indian state ... as helpless," says B. Raman, former head of counterterrorism for Indian top intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). "Others will want to repeat it," he predicts.

Indians' anger toward their government continued to mount Tuesday as several reports indicated that there was specific intelligence pointing to an attack on Mumbai from the sea - the way the terrorists entered the city.

On Sept. 18 and 24, RAW intercepted two satellite phone calls in which a member of the Pakistani militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba discussed an operation that would attack Mumbai by boat, according to the Hindustan Times, an Indian newspaper. One call mentioned the Taj Mahal Hotel, where the last fighter was killed Saturday.

Moreover, a US counterterrorism official told CNN Tuesday that "the United States warned the Indian government about a potential maritime attack against Mumbai at least a month before last week's massacre in Mumbai."

President Bush is diverting Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice from a meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Brussels this week to visit India. She is expected to arrive in New Delhi Wednesday.

India now feels confident it has established a link between the attackers and elements in Pakistan, perhaps Lashkar-e-Taiba. India is now demanding that Pakistan extradite 20 people - including the head of Lashkar-e-Taiba - which India's foreign minister, Pranab Mukherjee, called a "fugitive from Indian law." Pakistan is considering the request.

Significantly, Mr. Mukherjee says India is not currently considering the use of force against Pakistan. US officials were concerned that India might deploy more troops to its northern border, as it did after an attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001. Pakistan would have countered by pulling troops away from the fight against militants on the Afghan border.

That India felt the need to dismiss such an option is a measure of how deeply the country has been shaken by last week's attacks. Purely by the numbers, the attacks were barely more lethal than a series of bombings that hit Mumbai on July 11, 2006, killing 186. The current death toll from the latest attacks is 188. But newspapers and commentators here have repeatedly called this India's worst terrorist attack primarily because of the way it unfolded.

The paroxysm of the bombings was replaced by 60 hours of uncertainty. The militants moved through the city with military precision, killing as they headed toward three rendezvous points - the Taj and Oberoi hotels and

Nariman House, a Jewish community center.

In fact, during the fight for the Taj, Indian commandos expressed grudging admiration for the terrorists. They admitted that the terrorists knew the hotel better than the commandos did themselves, and they fought more like soldiers than terrorists.

Employing only guns and grenades, "the individual tactics they used were not that sophisticated," says John Harrison, a terrorism analyst at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. "But how they put them all together showed a tremendous amount of strategic thinking."

The simpler parts of the operation are easily copied. Terrorists in Kashmir, for instance, have long used similar sieges, albeit on a much smaller scale. "I believe this will become the new popular terrorist tactic since no police force in the world is prepared for ... such an attack," says Georgetown Professor Hoffman by e-mail.

He says that even an attack as complicated as the one in Mumbai could be reproduced. It is "very replicable - provided you have the training facilities, skilled trainers, time, and the ability to engage in pre-op [operation] planning and preparation," Hoffman says.

Others disagree, saying the Mumbai attack, with its multiple targets and coordinated movements, was more akin to 9/11, requiring such exhaustive preparation that it cannot be repeated easily.

"The complexity and scale might not be replicable elsewhere," says Professor Harrison, of Singapore.

The proficiency of the Mumbai terrorists has led to questions about Indian authorities' insistence that there were only 10 people involved. But Harrison says the figure "is very plausible," citing how a few terrorists at the 1972 Munich Olympics held off security forces for hours.

In a hotel like the Taj, "it is incredibly difficult for urban commandos to get control of a situation," he says.

Police have since revealed that the militants booby-trapped dead bodies with hand grenades to slow the commandos' progress. They set fires to add to the confusion. They even took cocaine, police reported, so that they could stay awake for 60 hours straight.

It seems likely, however, that the fighters had help in some form from local contacts - perhaps scouting sites or gathering information, experts say. The Indian police say they have not dismissed that possibility.

Their difficulties in coming to grips with the attacks as they happened will now become a global lesson, says Hoffman. Police worldwide will have to match terrorists' rising sophistication - from rescuing hostages quickly to knowing the layout of all potential targets.

"Police forces will have to prepare for more than one major operation," he says. (c) Copyright 2008. The Christian Science Monitor

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