

## Significance of Mumbai attacks on Singapore



*Ms Lo Hwei Yen*

Just two weeks ago, the rampage in Mumbai reminded Singaporeans the stark reality of terrorism facing the world.

That was when a Singaporean was among the more than 170 people who lost their lives in the carnage.

But as the dust over the Mumbai terror attacks settles down, what's the significance of the attacks for a small country like Singapore?

*Saifulbahri Ismail* finds out :

At least 22 foreigners were killed during the 26 November mayhem in Mumbai.

Among those who perished, 5 Americans, 5 Israelis, 1 British, 2 Australians, and 1 Singaporean.

28-year old Lo Hwei Yen is the first Singaporean to fall victim to a terrorist attack on foreign soil.

Ms Lo was held hostage at gunpoint at the Oberoi Trident hotel and her body was found on the 17th floor two days later.

Many in Singapore reacted with disbelief at her extraordinary death.

Perhaps what wasn't extraordinary is the fact that it could've happen to anyone while overseas.

Reports indicated that the gunmen showed a preference for Britons and Americans as hostages, for reasons clearly understood.

The perpetrators were demanding to see the passports and identifications of their hostages.

But why would they take a Singaporean hostage?

Yang Razali Kassim, senior fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies or RSIS says it was simply by chance :

"I would say it was more out of chance that they grabbed the woman as a hostage. The gunmen were consciously out to get Western targets, Americans and British and Israelis apparently were also in their hitlist. Any other foreigners may have been collateral damage as it were, unfortunately."

It's unfortunate that Ms Lo was just at the wrong place at the wrong time.

However, Professor Rohan Gunaratna, Head of International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorist Research at RSIS, feels the terrorists could also have seen a Singaporean as a valuable hostage.

"Singapore is ally an a friend of the United States. We have seen that Singapore faces the same threat level as the US, the UK, Australia. In fact, in Indonesia there was a very significant letter that was recovered, that was written by Nordin Mohd Top, the most active terrorist in South-east Asia where he listed Singapore side by side with Britain, with the US and Australia as one of their enemies. Jemaah Islamiah and Al-Qaeda and the group that mounted the Mumbai attacks they were all driven by one single ideology, that is the US their allies and their friends must be targeted and punished."

Although Singapore is seen close to the US, Mr Yang Razali explains that its foreign policy is driven first by national interests :

"Singapore's foreign policy is driven by firstly national interests of course but at the same time also by a balanced of interests, and that means working with any party that can advance Singapore's interests. The interests may not be achieved only by tagging on to Western interests. It can also be by identifying with non-Western interests, there have been many instances where Singaporean policies are closely associated with Asian countries. It is a policy of balanced interests and it is a very calibrated one."

The Mumbai terrorists took advantage of the hostage situation to expand their own

interests.

They made use of the Singaporean captive to send a message to the Indian authorities not to try any rescue assaults.

At the same time, holding foreign governments to ransom is an attempt by the perpetrators to globalise their message, according to political observer Eugene Tan from Singapore Management University.

"I think in some societies for example holding foreign governments to ransom has worked to some degree of success, so I think we see terrorists trying to replicate that. So, for example Spain withdrew their troops from Iraq after the Madrid train bombings. But I think the governments are not saying we're surrendering to terrorism, I think it's more the government responding to domestic pressures. So I think here it's terrorists trying to exert pressure, trying to globalise their message."

In a more globalised environment exposed to greater insecurities due to the threat of terrorism, Singaporeans are constantly reminded to be vigilant and not to let their guard down.

Still, Professor Rohan thinks there is one more precaution to take :

"Every Singaporean should take the necessary precautions that an American, a British, an Australian will take. Although Singapore is located in the third world, but it is a first world country and Singapore has very close partnerships with the Western world and the terrorists view Singapore as the aircraft carrier of the United States. Singapore has developed so many strong ties with the Middle East and with the Asian Muslim world, but the terrorists have constantly try to portray Singapore as a very close ally of the United States, and therefore it is imperative for every Singaporean to protect himself or herself especially when in Singapore but particularly when overseas."

Ms Lo's may be the first terror victim overseas, but Singaporeans must be prepared to accept that she may not be the last.

Even though Singaporeans should take precautions when travelling overseas, Eugene Tan from SMU firmly believes that this should not make being a Singaporean a liability :

"The moment Singaporeans feel that being Singaporean is a liability then I think our society will be much more at risk and that we'll all be held hostage mentally. I think certainly people have drawn the connection that Singapore has a close friend in America especially in the fight against terrorism. There may be people who feels that the terrorists would perceive Singaporean citizens as more valuable targets. I think the key thing here the moment we



think being a Singaporean's a liability, in a way the terrorists have won because we are being held hostage in our minds, in our beliefs, but I think this is the time where our resolve must not weaken because it's how we respond to the threats, to the attacks that would determine the character of Singaporeans, that will determine the type of society that we live in, and that choice is ours."

Global terrorism has grown more sophisticated, and the psychological warfare has the potential of becoming more dangerous than ever.

The fight is certainly going to be an arduous and painful one.

The tunnel is long and there's still no light at the end.

But Singaporeans or otherwise, all have a duty to battle this scourge amid us.