

Spot Report
Suicide Attack on Indian Embassy
7 July 2008

The Terrorist Incident

On 7 July 2008, the Indian Embassy in Afghanistan was attacked by a suicide bomber employing vehicle-borne improvised explosive device at 8.30 am (local time).¹ The deadly attack killed 41 people, including four Indian nationals and 10 Afghan security personnel deployed at the Embassy, and injured 147 others, mostly Afghans civilians lined up to seek visa to India.² The Indian nationals that were killed included Defence Attaché, Brigadier Ravi Datta, political and information counselor, V. Venkateswara Rao and two soldiers from the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) of India who were deployed at the Embassy's entrance gate for security.³ Among the injured were six Afghan security guards deployed outside the Indian Embassy as well as five Afghan security guards and two Indonesian diplomats in the nearby Indonesian embassy.⁴ The attack took place at a time when the two Indian diplomats – Brig. Datta and Mr. Rao – riding in their respective cars, were entering the Embassy premises.⁵ The suicide bomber struck his Toyota Corolla car into Rao's car, thereby causing the explosion.⁶

According to an Indian diplomat, the deadly explosion blew off the embassy's gate and outer structure and damaged building inside the compound.⁷ The suicide attack also damaged nearby buildings, including the Indonesian embassy, several shops, two Indian embassy vehicles apart from scores of cars damaged in the blast.⁸



Courtesy: The Hindu, 8 July 2008



Courtesy: The News, 8 July 2008

¹ 'Terror Strikes Indian Embassy in Afghanistan', *The Times of India*, 7 July 2008

² 'Kabul Suicide Attack on Indian Embassy Kills 41', *The News*, 8 July 2008

³ '40 Die in Attack Outside Indian Embassy in Kabul', *The Hindu*, 8 July 2008

⁴ 'Suicide Attack on Indian Embassy in Kabul, 41 Dead', *Daily Times*, 8 July 2008

⁵ 'Is ISI Behind Kabul Embassy Blast?', *The Times of India*, 7 July 2008

⁶ 'Terror Strikes Indian Embassy in Afghanistan', Op.cit.

⁷ 'Indian Embassy Hit in Kabul: 41 Dead', *The Post*, 8 July 2008

⁸ 'Is ISI Behind Kabul Embassy Blast?', Op.cit.

Reaction to the Attack

The attack is perhaps the deadliest assault in the Afghan capital, Kabul, since the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in November 2001. The Embassy is situated in the Shahr-e-Nau area of Kabul, where the Afghan Interior Ministry is also located.⁹ The Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, stated that “the enemies of peace in Afghanistan wanted to hurt ongoing friendly relations of Afghanistan with the rest of the world, especially Kabul.”¹⁰ The Afghan Foreign Ministry spokesman, Sultan Baheen, stated that “the enemies of Afghanistan and India’s relationship cannot hamper our relationship by conducting such attacks.”¹¹ The Indian External Affairs Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, condemned the terrorist attack saying “such acts of terror will not deter us from fulfilling our commitments to the government and the people of Afghanistan.”¹² The US condemned the suicide bombing as “a needless act of violence,” and offered its condolences to those who lost their lives and others who got injured.¹³ British Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, described the attack as “cowardly actions carried out by those with no regard for human life.”¹⁴ Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi condemned the suicide attack and said that we “condemn terrorism in all its forms and manifestations as this menace negates the very essence of human values.”¹⁵ The EU described the attack as an action “clearly intended to undermine the process of stabilization and reconstruction in Afghanistan.”¹⁶ NATO’s Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer also condemned the attack saying that it was a “clear attempt to undermine regional relations.”¹⁷

Suspects Behind the Attack

According to the Afghan Interior Ministry, the suicide attack on the Indian Embassy “was carried out in coordination and consultation with an active intelligence service in the region.”¹⁸ The Afghan Presidential Spokesman, Hodayun Hamidzada, said that the attack was “designed outside Afghanistan and it was exported to Afghanistan” with the help of collaborators. He further said that “The sophistication of this attack and the kind of materials used and the specific targeting, everything has the hallmark of a particular intelligence agency that has conducted similar terrorist acts in Afghanistan in the past.”¹⁹ The Afghan government blamed Pakistan’s external intelligence agency, the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) to be responsible for the blast.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ ‘Indian Embassy Hit in Kabul: 41 Dead’, *The Post*, 8 July 2008

¹² ‘Bomb Rocks India Embassy in Kabul’, *BBC*, 7 July 2008

¹³ ‘US Condemns Embassy Attack’, *Daily Times*, 8 July 2008

¹⁴ ‘UK, EU Condemn Attack on Indian Embassy’, *The Times of India*, 7 July 2008

¹⁵ ‘Pakistan Slams Kabul Bombing’, *Daily Times*, 8 July 2008

¹⁶ Solana condemns attack on Indian embassy in Kabul, *Xinhua News Agency*, 8 July 2008

¹⁷ NATO Condemns Kabul Bombing, *Xinhua News Agency*, 8 July 2008

¹⁸ ‘Is ISI Behind Kabul Embassy Blast?’, *Op.cit.*

¹⁹ ‘Pakistan Behind Attack, Alleges Kabul’, *The Post*, 9 July 2008

Various Indian newspapers also commented on Pakistan's ISI's possible involvement in the suicide attack. According to them, the "ISI's Taliban groups" were responsible for the suicide attack.²⁰

Mullah Omar-led Afghan Taliban, however, denied their involvement in the terrorist attack. According to Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, "we have not done this."²¹ Mujahid said, "we wish we had carried out this attack ... since India has been the enemy of the Islamic Emirate."²²

The US government also said that they have not seen any involvement of foreign hand behind the Indian embassy attack. According to the US Defence Secretary, Robert Gates, "I have not seen any evidence or proof that foreign agents were involved."²³ It needs to be mentioned that the Afghan, Indian and US intelligence agencies are presently conducting a joint investigation into the terrorist attack.²⁴

There is a strong possibility that the terrorist attack could have been conducted by the Afghan Taliban's "Haqqani Network", which is led by the Afghan veteran warlord, Maulana Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son, Sirajuddin Haqqani. The Haqqani network is mainly based in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan, such as Khost, Paktia and Paktika. It needs to be mentioned that the Haqqani network has recently increased its activities in Kabul and other Afghan provinces, such as Ningarhar, Kapisa etc situated close to the capital. Haqqani network was believed to be behind the Serena Hotel attack in Kabul in January 2008.²⁵ Also, the attack on President Karzai on 27 April 2008 during a military parade in Kabul was orchestrated by Humayun, who the Afghan government latter claimed was linked to the Haqqani network.²⁶ Also during the investigation of the military parade attack, the Afghan government arrested two Afghan government officials belonging to defence ministry and law enforcement agency of the country.²⁷ The government later revealed that the arrested officials were helping the Taliban to carry out attacks in Kabul.

The role of Al Qaeda in the Indian embassy attack cannot be ruled out. Al Qaeda has carried out a similar attack against the Embassy of Denmark in Islamabad, Pakistan.²⁸ It has also been reported that whenever there has been a high-casualty bombings of the Afghan civilians, they tend to have been carried out by Arab Al Qaeda bombers.²⁹ India has been playing a significant role in Afghanistan's reconstruction and development, through providing training to the Afghan National Army as well as sharing its counter-insurgency experiences with Afghanistan. The Afghan Defence Minister, Gen. Abdul

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² 'Afghan Officials Accuse Pakistan of Indian Embassy Attack', *The News*, 9 July 2008

²³ 'No Foreign Hand in Attack on Embassy in Kabul: US', *The Times of India*, 10 July 2008

²⁴ 'Jihadist Polemic Holds Clues to Mission Bombing' *The Hindu*, 9 July 2008

²⁵ 'Old Taliban Commander is Face of Rising Afghan Threat', *The New York Times*, 17 June 2008

²⁶ 'Government Employees Jailed in Karzai Plot', *CBS News*, 4 May 2008

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ 'Al Qaeda Claims Attack on Danish Embassy', *Reuters*, 4 June 2008

²⁹ 'The World's Worst Suicide Bombers', *Asia Times Online*, 25 July 2007

Rahim Wardak, visited India in April 2008. According to Wardak, “we are seeking Indian cooperation against threats of terrorism and extremism. I am told you (India) have good counter-insurgency training institutes. We will share our experience.” Wardak also sought enhancement of logistical capability of their large Soviet fleet of aircraft and tanks from India, which also has a similar inventory. Moreover, he also sought assistance in terms of supply of spare parts of Mahindra and Tata vehicles. Afghanistan has 8 to 10 MI-35 helicopter gunship for which Wardak requested training support for Afghan pilots from Indian Air Force chief, Air Chief Marshal Fali Homi Major.³⁰ Given the nature of India’s support to Karzai Administration in Kabul, it could have invited retaliation from the Taliban and Al Qaeda elements situated in Afghanistan.

Another important aspect that comes to light is the lapse security arrangement in the Kabul area where the Indian Embassy is housed. The fact that the embassy is located near the Interior Ministry and few other embassies including the Indonesian embassy makes it a high security zone. It is, therefore, difficult to understand how a vehicle carrying explosives entered the area without any security checks, and was able to reach its target with ease. Also, the fact that the attack took place at a time when two senior officials of the Embassy had arrived at the scene and were entering the building premises points to the effective surveillance and intelligence mechanism of the perpetrators.

On 8 July 2008, another effort to kill Indian road workers in Afghanistan’s Nimroz Province was foiled when a remote-controlled bomb placed on a bus, on which the workers were traveling, was discovered and made ineffective.³¹

Similarly, another bomb attack on an Indian consulate in Jalalabad Province in Afghanistan on 9 July 2008 killed six persons, including 2 Indians and four others. The Taliban claimed responsibility of the attack.³²

The Afghan government needs to strengthen its security apparatus to ward off such terrorist attacks on important installations in Kabul and other provincial capitals in the country. The worsening security situation in Kabul merits special attention since it is the capital and the most important financial, political and cultural hub of the country. A worsening security situation may force foreign nationals and organisation to flee Afghanistan to avoid harm.

The terrorist attack on the Indian embassy could also affect Pakistan-India relations. Both the countries are involved in a peace process since 2004 to resolve their outstanding disputes. Such terrorist attacks have the potential to derail the peace efforts between the two countries. Similarly, it also complicates the Pak-Afghan-India relations where more cooperation is required by both Pakistan and India to stabilize Afghanistan, instead of turning it into a battleground in quest of extending their influence in the war ravaged

³⁰ ‘India Rules Out Military Involvement in Afghanistan’, *ThaiIndian News*, 8 April 2008, http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/uncategorized/india-rules-out-military-involvement-in-afghanistan_10035771.html

³¹ ‘Afghan Officials Accuse Pakistan of Indian Embassy Attack’, *The News*, 9 July 2008

³² ‘6 Killed in Attack on Jalalabad Indian Consulate’, *Daily Times*, 10 July 2008

country. Since both Afghanistan and Pakistan are inflicted with the menace of Taliban and Al Qaeda-led violence, Pakistan also need to be included in the joint investigations into the embassy bombing. The existence of Joint Anti-Terrorism Mechanism (JATM) between Pakistan and India and the Pak-Afghan-US tripartite commission need to be utilized to jointly fight the menace of terrorism in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India through sharing intelligence and undertaking joint operations against terrorists in the region.