

SAMJHAUTA TRAIN ATTACK IN INDIA: DANGEROUS DIMENSIONS



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Unknown terrorists struck the Samjhauta Express train –also dubbed as “Friendship Express” – late in the evening of 18 February 2007, which left 68 people dead, including four railway security personnel and nearly 30 injured.¹ The train was carrying 757 passengers, including 553 Pakistanis, from New Delhi to Lahore via Attari. Two out of five low-intensity improvised incendiary devices set on the carriages exploded into fireballs near the Shiva village in Panipat District, almost 100 km north of New Delhi.² The fire quickly engulfed two compartments of the train on which the explosions took place, trapping the sleeping passengers inside their compartments. The train finally came to a halt 2.3 kilometers from the Diwaana railway station in Panipat district.

According to the investigators, the perpetrators used incendiary devices in order to deceive investigators into believing that the act was an arson attack. Investigators believed that the devices were cleverly designed to start a fire.³ Two of the devices were ignited leaving two carriages on fire, while the three other devices failed to explode, and were diffused by the local police.⁴

According to reports, “one of the unexploded suitcases revealed a dozen plastic bottles packed inside, carrying a highly flammable cocktail of fuel oils and chemicals, mixed with pieces of cloth to prolong the fire. Covering them was a foam pad embedded with a

¹ ‘Their Screams Filled the Night’ *The News*, 20 February, 2007, www.thenews.com.pk/updates.asp#18158

² ‘67 Killed in Samjhauta Express Carnage’, *Daily Times*, 20 February 2007, www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007\02\20\story_20_2_2007_pg1_1

³ ‘Samjhauta Express Firebombed, 67 Killed’, *The Hindu*, 20 February 2007.

⁴ ‘67 Killed in Samjhauta Express Carnage’, *Daily Times*, 20 February 2007, www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007\02\20\story_20_2_2007_pg1_1

small electronic circuit board in a transparent plastic box. Coloured wires connected to a metal timer the size of a pencil and a thin black torch like detonator were also found. Alongside, a plastic bag with a yellowish powder – thought to be sulphur – was packed in cotton wool. There was a light blinking on the outside of a suitcase probably to indicate that the timer had been set.”⁵

During a press conference, Inspector General of Police of Haryana Province showed various objects used in the blast, which comprised of India-made bottles filled with kerosene and a piece of cloth, pipe and clock used as a timer.⁶ Investigators also said that ammonium nitrate and sulphur were used in the bomb devices.

The casualty figures were higher than expected due to the fact that the passengers were unable to escape their compartments, as the doors were locked from the inside, as it is standard procedure by the Indian railway officials before the train embarks on its journey. Similarly, steel bars are commonly found on the windows of the carriages in Indian and Pakistani trains. One of the doors of the two ill-fated compartments of Samjhauta Express train was also reported to have fused shut by the intense heat caused by the blistering fire. All these factors combined, leaving virtually no chance for the panicking passengers to get off the train.

According to eyewitnesses, two suspicious men boarded the train from New Delhi, but alighted from it about 15 minutes before the explosions near the Deewana station. They departed the train as it slowed down at one point. According to these witnesses, both men had a heated argument with the personnel of Railway Protection Force before they alighted. The argument involved the destination of the train, which the men believed was headed to Ahmedabad city in the state of Gujarat in India. The Indian police released the sketches of these two suspects.

A lapse in security was also reported to have contributed to this incident, since the Indian railway officials issued two tickets without ascertaining the legal documents (passports etc) of the passengers. Similarly, the same two alleged persons were also allowed to alight from the train just 15 minutes before the Diwaani railway station. In addition to the lapse, there was poor security procedure at the station. Railways authorities lack scanner machines and devices, and relied on metal detectors and did not individually check bags. This should be an easier task for a limited service express train rather than a typical commuter service where scanning is not practical.

So far, no group has claimed responsibility for the attack. However, leadership in both countries agrees that it was an attempt to sabotage the ongoing peace process between the two countries. Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, while condemning the attack as “heinous terrorist act” resolved to bring the perpetrators to justice. The attack also came

⁵ ‘Bomber’s Deadly Work on Show Beside Tracks’, *Daily Times*, 20 February 2007, www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007\02\20\story_20-2-2007_pg7_10

⁶ ‘India Blames Jaish, Lashkar in Train Blasts’, *The News*, 20 February 2007, www.thenews.com.p/updates.asp#18158

at a time when Pakistani Foreign Minister, Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri, was about to visit India on 20 February in connection with the composite dialogue.

According to Indian Railways Minister, Lalu Prasad Yadav, one suspect who was on the ill-fated train was detained at the site, while hunt for his associate has been launched. On 20 February, Indian police blamed two Pakistan-based terrorist outfits, Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) for the attack.⁷ However, Jamatud Dawa (previously LeT) chief, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, has described the incident as “target killing” of Muslims and has asked for joint Indo-Pakistani investigation into the incident.⁸ At the same time, an official of the Indian Home Ministry said that the government is not ruling out the involvement of Kashmiri separatist groups as well as Hindu extremists in the gory incident.⁹

On 21 February, the Indian Home Ministry reported to have discovered a “vital link” to the train attack. According to the ministry, Indian investigators are looking into a suspicious phone call made to Pakistan-administered Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) from India soon after the train incident. A senior police official was also quoted as saying that the patterns of bombing “points to Islamic terrorists.”¹⁰ Similarly, *Express India* also reported that Indian railway authorities had recently received a letter allegedly written by JeM that threatened bomb attacks on railway stations and bus terminals all over New Delhi.¹¹

The same day, United Jihad Council (UJC) – an umbrella organization of separatist militant Kashmiri groups - and LeT denied their involvement in the attack.¹²

The arson attack also came just one week before the five-years anniversary of the Godhra train bombing in the Indian city of Gujarat on 27 February 2002, in which 57 Hindu pilgrims died of fire.¹³ The bombing set off deadly Hindu-Muslim riots in Gujarat, that left thousands of people dead in one of the worst communal violence India had seen in post-independence era.

Dangerous Dimensions

The present attack employing low-technology incendiary devices is the first targeting Indian transportation infrastructure. Previous attacks on Indian commuter trains involved

⁷ ‘India Blames Jaish, Lashkar in Train Blasts’, *The News*, 20 February 2007, www.thenews.com.pk/updates.asp#18158

⁸ ‘Hafiz Saeed Wants Joint Indo-Pak Probe into Train Blast’, *Daily Times*, 21 February 2007, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007\02\21\story_21-2-2007_pg7_32

⁹ ‘Their Screams Filled the Night’, *The News*, 20 February 2007, www.thenews.com.pk/updates.asp#18158

¹⁰ ‘Samjhauta Firebombing: India Probes Kashmir Link’, *Daily Times*, 22 February 2007, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007\02\22\story_22-2-2007_pg1_2

¹¹ ‘JeM Had Sent Threat Letter on Feb 7’, *Express India*, 22 February 2007, www.expressindia.com/fullstory.php?newsid=81812

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ ‘2002: Hindu Die in Train Fire’, *BBC*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/27/newsid_4168000/4168073.stm

sophisticated devices employing pressure cooker techniques, remote controlled devices, RDX and other high explosive material that caused more damage to life and property. Furthermore, RDX is difficult to acquire, along with the technical know how to assemble such a device. The present attack involves incendiary devices that are easily available and requires less sophistication to assemble. A forensic scientist interviewed by Reuters also testified to this argument saying: “This seems like the act of local groups who used local materials and locally available technology.”¹⁴

Compared to this, Kashmiri separatist militant groups, especially LeT and JeM terrorist organizations, are believed to have far more sophistication in carrying out such attacks. India in recent months has arrested suspects belonging to LeT and JeM, who were in possession of explosive material, especially RDX, and weapons and were planning to attack vital places in India. This as well as the fact that the casualties were Pakistani Muslims might discount the involvement of these groups. However, their involvement could also not be ruled out until completion of the investigation.

The Samjhauta Express attack has added two new dimensions to terrorism phenomenon in India. Firstly, terrorist may shift focus from usage of RDX and sophisticated IEDs to employing incendiary devices, which are crude explosive devices employing easily available chemicals and materials. This could change the tactics of terrorist attacks in India.

Secondly, terrorists tend to increasingly focus on rail systems across India. With airports and airlines carefully guarded since 9/11, attacks on railways are comparatively easier to commit. India has some 9,000 trains carrying 15 million passengers through 7,000 stations every day, and protecting the Indian railway network is a security agency’s nightmare at the best of times.¹⁵

¹⁴ ‘Bomber’s Deadly Work on Show Beside Tracks’, *Daily Times*, 20 February 2007, www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007\02\20\story_2-2-2007_pg_7_10

¹⁵ ‘Train Blasts Expose Indian Railways Woes’, *Daily Times*, 21 February 2007, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007\02\21\story_21-2-2007_pg4_18