Serial bomb blasts in Jaipur (India): 13 May 2008

The Incident

A series of bomb blasts took place in Jaipur on Tuesday, 13 May 2008. Media sources indicated that eight explosions occurred in quick succession within a span of twenty minutes from 7.25 p.m. to 7.45 p.m.¹.

The bombs went off in the crowded market districts of Tripolia Bazar, Johari Bazar, Manas Chowk, Badi Choupal and Choti Choupal. Two of the blasts occurred outside Hindu temples at Sanganeri Gate and Chandpole. Another took place in the vicinity of the renowned Hawa Mahal, a popular tourist attraction. Reports stated that one explosive device had been defused by the bomb disposal squad².

The police said that 75 people died from the bombings and the stampede that ensued³. At least 150 people sustained injuries. The actual number of casualties is expected to rise.

Bicycles stationed at the sites where the bombings occurred had served as a means of concealing the explosive devices used. Police made two arrests and detained several others for questioning on Wednesday, 14 May 2008. One of the men questioned had allegedly sold nine bicycles to a single individual two days prior to the blasts⁴.

Location

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Modus Operandi

The explosive device defused by the bomb disposal squad was found attached to a bicycle at one of the bomb sites at Chandpole Gate. This piece of evidence substantiated reports which claimed that vehicles including bicycles were used by terrorists to conceal the bombs.

Intelligence officials said both RDX and ammonium-nitrate were used to make the bombs. Other preliminary findings indicate that the bombs were packed with metal splinters or ball bearings to maximize damage in crowded areas. Sources disagree on the mode of detonation of the devices with some claiming that the bombs may have been set off by remote control while others suggest that timers were used. The use of such homemade bombs with RDX or TNT can be patterned with previous bombings in Malegaon in 2006 and Uttar Pradesh in November 2007. Chemical analysis of the unexploded bomb which was recovered is expected to yield further information.

Pictures from the blast site

7 “60 killed, 150 injured as terror strikes Pink city”, The Hindu, 14/05/2008, http://www.hindu.com/2008/05/14/stories/2008051460640100.htm
8 “Hindus and Muslims alike offer help”, The Straits Times, 15/05/2008
9 60 killed, 150 injured as terror strikes Pink city”, The Hindu, 14/05/2008, http://www.hindu.com/2008/05/14/stories/2008051460640100.htm
10 http://www.ibnlive.com/photogallery/828-18.html#view_start
Who may be responsible?

The Indian Home Ministry has suggested that the Bangladeshi-based group Harkat-ul-Jehadi Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B) could be the likely perpetrators. The tactic of attaching bombs into bicycles bears a resemblance to that suspected to have been employed by HuJI-B during the 2007 bombing at the Uttar Pradesh court premises.

A joint director of the Indian Intelligence Bureau (IB) said that the department had received an indication last year that an attack in Jaipur was a possibility. Mohammed Jalaluddin, who was arrested in Lucknow in 2007, had claimed during investigations by the IIB that Jaipur was a prime target for Huji-B activity. At the time of his arrest, Jalaluddin was suspected to be the “Indian operations commander” of HuJI-B.

Police and central intelligence sources have also said that the bombing may be a collaborative effort between HuJI-B, Students’ Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT). After a spate of arrests of SIMI members on 27 March 2008, security officials claimed that SIMI members had joined Pakistan-based militant organisations like the LeT and were planning to conduct serial attacks in various cities in India. The serial blasts in Jaipur could also have been carried out in retaliation to the arrests in March 2008.

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11 Ibid.
14 “HuJI, SIMI stamp on attacks”, The Hindustan Times, 14/05/2008, http://www.hindustantimes.com/storypage/storypage.aspx?id=7c64f4d0-1a5f-4036-94bc-b097a340eb37&ParentID=3ef46c6a-5812-43de-8744-e71937e80255&Headline=HuJI%2c+SIMI%2c+stamp%2c+attacks
15 “SIMI activists were planning serial blasts”, Times of India, 19/03/2008
Reports have emerged stating that a group named ‘Indian Mujahideen’ sent out an email to the media claiming responsibility for the blasts. Following the blasts in Uttar Pradesh on 23 Nov 2007, a similar email was sent out to television stations from a group calling itself the ‘Indian Mujahideen’. In the email, the group stated that it represented the interests of Muslims in India and did not seek to align itself with any known terrorist group. Other reports however, have denied the independent existence of such a group and claim that it is a HuJI-B and SIMI creation.

Analysis

There is no precise information on the actual target of the attacks. The fact that two Hindu temples were among the bomb sites fits into a previously observed trend of bombings in close proximity of religious establishments (both Hindu and Muslim) in different parts of India in the past few years, viz. Mecca masjid blast in March 2007, blasts at the Sufi shrine in Ajmer in 2007, bombings in the Hindu holy city of Varanasi in 2006. The underlying motive may be to foment communal tensions between the Hindu and Muslim communities in India. Additionally, the blasts took place on a Tuesday evening (Tuesday being traditionally the day to worship Lord Hanuman and when temples are usually crowded with people after office hours). This would seem to suggest that Hindus were targeted.

Moreover, Rajasthan (of which Jaipur is the capital) is currently ruled by a Hindu right-wing nationalist party - Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which was allegedly involved in the destruction of the Babri masjid in 1992. It was this event, followed by the Gujarat carnage in 2002 which resulted in deep anti-government sentiments within the Muslim population in India.

Jaipur which is a vibrant and popular tourist hub in India attracts a large number of tourists- American, European, Jewish and others. Targeting tourist hotspots like the Hawa Mahal in Jaipur would be an ideal tactic for groups such as SIMI, LeT and HuJI to attract international attention to their cause.

The fact that Jaipur was set to play host to a high-profile Indian Premier League cricket game on Saturday, 17 May 2008 could also have been among the motivating factors behind the timing of the blasts.

Implications

18 LeT aims to liberate Jammu and Kashmir and create three distinct Muslim homelands in India. The first consisting of Kashmir and Pakistan, and the second and third of areas in North and South India respectively. SIMI’s objective is to ultimately establish a Dar-ul-Islam (Land of Islam) in India through forceful conversion to Islam or killing. HuJI-B seeks to instate Islamic Hukumat (rule) in Bangladesh through violent means.
In the aftermath of the incident, there has been no communal violence reported. The fact that the published list of victims includes members from both Hindu and Muslim communities has probably alleviated any tensions. In hospitals, both Hindus and Muslims have come forth to offer aid to those injured during the bombings. If the intended objective of the perpetrators was to incite communal tensions, it has not worked.

The Jaipur bombings come amidst reports of firing across the line of control dividing Himalayan territory by Pakistani forces and the alleged infiltration into Samba, Kashmir by militants. Media reports have insinuated that statements from Indian government officials mentioning a “foreign hand” in the Jaipur blasts are probably referring to Pakistan. These issues are likely to be discussed during Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee’s visit to Islamabad from 20-21 May 2008.

Given that elections in Rajasthan are six months away, the bomb blasts could have an impact on the domestic political scene as well. The BJP is likely to point to a worrying trend of terrorist activity which the central government must act quickly to redress. The ruling Congress Party on the other hand, may respond by accusing the BJP of losing its grip on law and order in Rajasthan. The blasts could feature as the subject of a political blame game between the BJP and the Congress Party.

Questions have been raised about the failure of intelligence surrounding the blasts. The police said that they had not received any intelligence on possible attacks in Jaipur. However, the IIB’s claim that they did issue an alert after the Jalaluddin arrest signals that the process of information sharing between government agencies remains ineffective. Minister of State for Home Affairs Shri Prakash Jaiswal acknowledged that there is a need for a federal intelligence agency which would follow up on early leads to suppress terrorist activity.

Tourism contributes 15% to the state economy in Rajasthan. Rajasthan also accounts for about 11.2% of foreign tourist arrivals and 3.3% of domestic tourist arrivals in India. With the blasts in Ajmer in 2007 and now in Jaipur in 2008, the number of foreign and domestic tourists coming into the state may be affected, at least for the time being.

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20 “BJP, Cong set to play blame game”, Hindustan Times, 14/05/2008, http://www.hindustantimes.com/storypage/storypage.aspx?id=0df974ff-58a9-495d-bc75-f6903c4080bb&ParentID=3ef46c6a-5812-43de-8744-e71937ecb025&&Headline=BJP%2c+Cong+set+to+play+blame+game