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India's Pune Blast: Hinting of another 26/11?

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The Pune bomb blast highlights the vulnerability of 'soft spots' to acts of terror within India. Transnational terrorist outfits are best tackled through increased international cooperation and involving local communities to secure susceptible neighbourhoods.

THE WEEKEND blast at the German Bakery in Pune was a grim reminder of the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai, India's commercial city. While the act does not compare itself with the death and destruction from the Mumbai attacks, the fact that terror continues to haunt 'soft spots' in India is a matter of serious concern. Pune, a city known for its cosmopolitan culture attracts a very large technical workforce to staff its IT parks, pharmaceutical laboratories and heavy industries. The city also happens to be one of India's fastest growing educational hubs. With close to a dozen educational institutions, it offers a host of specialised programmes to several thousand local as well as foreign students.

The Incident

The blast, which occurred more than a year after the 26/11 attacks in 2008, ripped apart this trendy bakery, killing nine persons and injuring some 60 others, including a few foreigners. This was the first time that the city has seen such an attack. The explosive device delivered by an 'unsuspecting' patron was triggered during the rush hours of the evening. The attack seemed quite unsophisticated; the device camouflaged as a backpack was activated by a remote control or timed-fuse action. It is also quite possible that the device was triggered off when the eatery staff tried to examine the unattended baggage.

Initial reports indicate the possible involvement of Indian Mujahideen (IM). The authorities however maintain that this remained unconfirmed. Incidentally, the bakery happened to be located close to the

Chabad House, a well known Jewish cultural centre, and the famed Osho Ashram – much popular with westerners in the past. FBI investigations had recently revealed that both the locations had been visited by David Headley as part of his mission to collect information for potential targets in India. Formerly known as Daood Sayed Gilani, Headley is a Pakistani-American businessman accused of involvement in the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

Competing Explanations

Few questions have been raised about the incident. Why was the German bakery targeted? What was the intent? How does this incident differ from patterns witnessed in the past? Which terrorist outfit could have been responsible? Did it have anything to do with the expatriate population in the town? Or was it just well timed to scuttle the dialogue between India and Pakistan scheduled later this month? There are several competing arguments doing rounds. While most allude to the Indo-Pak dialogue, it is worth examining some other evidence as well.

India's counterterror expert B. Raman raises some interesting facts. He claims that the city came to be known as a centre for jihadi activities way back in March 2002. This came to light when a Palestinian national named Abu Zubaidah -- a close lieutenant of Osama Bin Laden – revealed that he had trained as a computer engineer at Pune before joining the Al Qaeda. Abu Zubaidah is presently detained at the Guantanamo Detention Centre. Later in October 2008, a few Indian Mujahideen suspects arrested by Mumbai police turned out to be residents of Pune. They were all computer graduates and, one of them namely Mohammad Asghar Peerbhoy had even studied at Pune's Quran Foundation – a place known for recruiting cadres for the IM. Incidentally, Riaz Bhatkal, the chief of Indian Mujahideen, also hails from Pune and allegedly maintains close links with Pakistan's banned organisations, Lashkar-e-Toiba and its charity wing, Jammāt-ud-Daawa (LeT/JuD).

There is yet another interesting argument – on the choice of target. Raman draws attention to the analysis of Nick Grace – a counterterrorism expert – on a person of Moroccan origin named Bekkay Harrach, who grew up in Germany and then gravitated to Al Qaeda. Bekkay has repeatedly issued terror threats to Germany, one of significance being the statement made prior to the attack on the German Embassy in Kabul in January 2009. The Pune attack could even be seen in this context.

The Stratfor however carries a different view. It cites a recent statement by Ilyas Kashmiri, the commander of 313 Brigade, which warns India of grave consequences during the upcoming global sporting events within the country. The 313 Brigade is the fighting arm of the International Islamic Front formed by Osama bin Laden in 1998. Stratfor opines that incidents of such kind by prodigies of Al Qaeda are likely to increase in future. Kashmiri could well have had a distant hand in the incident. It is even possible that the claim put forth for the incident by Lashkar-e-Taiba al Alami – a new faction of LeT -- could have been prompted by Kashmiri.

It is time that these pronouncements from Al Qaeda are taken seriously. The argument that Al Qaeda as an outfit is increasingly becoming ineffective or diffused is questionable. In fact, the Al Qaeda and Taliban are threats of serious consequence in the region. The two combined have produced the most virulent '*Tali-qaida*' effect in highlands of Pakistan. Of late, its seeping effect east of the Indus carries serious implications for India as well.

Socialising the Approach

The incident is yet another reminder of a growing need for international cooperation to combat terrorism. Notwithstanding the emerging trend, there can be no denial of the fact that intelligence agencies need to increasingly cooperate to contain terror at the global, regional and national levels. Exchange of real time information and collaborative interpretation of inputs can go a long way in curbing 'lone wolf' attacks like the one witnessed at Pune or the catastrophic attacks of 9/11 and 26/11. Sharing of intelligence inputs through a cooperative framework is therefore crucial towards securing the 'soft spots'.

Yet at another level, equally important is the involvement of local communities in securing the neighbourhoods. Community-based policing, for example, can enhance the state's capacity to check terrorism. Collaborative security structures between the state and its populace are relevant, and governments need to seriously work towards evolving such ethics and work groups. In no way does this excuse the state of its prime responsibility to protect its citizens.

Several such measures have been initiated in the Indian context. But then, the state still needs to walk the 'last mile' to field optimal policing and counterterror structures to secure its large populace.

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