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South Asia

Dec 5, 2008



Singing canary in a terrorist opera

By Raja Murthy

MUMBAI - "Jihad means to kill, become famous and make God happy," captured terrorist Ajmal Amir Kasab reportedly answered interrogating Mumbai police when asked to define "jihad", or "holy war", a term some militants use to justify violence.

Police officials also claimed Kasab could not recite any verse in the Koran, the Islamic holy book, and that he admitted that money tempted him to enlist in the November 26 terrorist attack on Mumbai, along with nine others, all of whom were killed. The seaborne assault last week launched from outside India killed 183 people and injured over 300.

After officially banned Pakistan-based terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET) promised to compensate Kasab's impoverished family

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in Faridkot village in Pakistan's Punjab province, Kasab's father asked him to join the LET a year ago, according to the "confession".

Twenty-one-year old Kasab was captured by Mumbai police at Girgaum Chowpatty on Marine Drive during their three-night siege of two luxury hotels and a Jewish community center in south Mumbai.

Kasab is a rare prize: a terrorist captured alive on a suicide mission. He is also the center of a mystery because there have been no coherent or consistent accounts of his statements to authorities.

The captured terrorist's contradictory explanations are mirrored in India's confused official response to what's being described as the world's most audacious and brutal urban terrorist attack since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.



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Indian and international media professionals for the past week have not had access to any coordinated government briefings on the crisis. There is no spokesperson or even official statements clearly underlining India's position.

For instance, on the afternoon of December 2, Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee ruled out India launching military action against Pakistan. By night, however, Mukherjee was reported to have said nothing was ruled out on how to respond to Pakistan.

On December 3, Mukherjee declared that India's response will be based on what action Pakistan takes to deliver on Indian demands, such as handing over a list of "20 Most Wanted" fugitives said to be in Pakistan.

But later that day, Mukherjee silently stormed past reporters asking him to respond to news that Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari had bluntly refused to hand over any fugitive to India.

In the absence of a strong leader to calm, reassure and direct a shocked nation, India's ministers, officials, generals, admirals and police officials appear to be irresponsibly ad-libbing in front of TV cameras and media persons.

India's lack of leadership was conspicuous on the evening of December 3 as hundreds of thousands of citizens took to the streets in nationwide marches in which angry participants demanded action. Pakistan's silence has added to public fury.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh flew to Bangalore to attend a function while New Delhi boiled in a crisis with global ramifications, and an estimated 100,000 Mumbai residents marched to the Gateway of India near the Taj Mahal hotel seized by terrorists a week ago. Manmohan is yet to visit Mumbai since the terrorists' strike.

The government mishandling of the events of the past week come off like a badly directed terrorist opera. The only thing keeping the situation from appearing farcical are the 183 people from over 10

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countries who lost their lives, and the subsequent aggressive posturing of nuclear-armed neighbors.



Matching India's tragic confusion this week, are the differing "confessions" of LET-recruit Kasab which are splashing across Indian and international media through a series of unnamed sources.

Kasab is to appear in court December 11. According to Indian law, he has the right to disown his entire confession made to the police by claiming was made under duress.

Fifteen Mumbai police officers are interrogating Kasab. Apparently each one is sneaking his version of proceedings to media contacts, with the Maharashtra state government too busy with its own woes to plug leaks. After a week-long struggle for survival, Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh was sacked on Wednesday. The firing followed the resignations of Indian home minister Shivraj Patil and Mumbai counterpart R R Patil.

With the US Federal Bureau of Investigation, Israeli police and Scotland Yard joining in the interrogations, more versions of Kasab's statements can be expected until Mumbai police reveal videos of his recorded testimony.

Kasab's name and nationality were confirmed by Mumbai Police Commissioner Hassan Gafoor on December 2 in his first press conference after the terrorist attacks.

The rest of Kasab's alleged confessions appear to be bewildering contradictions. According to one version, Kasab confessed to being a small-time pickpocket in Pakistan who joined the LET to get arms training to further his career in crime.

In another version, the captured terrorist allegedly said he was just an impoverished village youth with little education. But one early report claimed that he speaks fluent English.

According to other reports, Kasab said he was sent on a suicide mission after promises of money and a Kashmiri bride.

The Mumbai police have neither denied nor confirmed any reported statements of this suicidal terrorist who is apparently singing like the proverbial canary to his captors.

The Mumbai daily Afternoon Dispatch & Courier twirled another version on December 2. Quoting "sources", the report said interrogating senior police officers suspected Kasab and his fellow terrorists had been using drugs like LSD to induce the daring and stamina needed to last the 60-hour siege without sleep. The use of mind-altering drugs was also used to explain the inconsistency of Kasab's statements.

India's Muslim leaders moved quickly to distance Islam from terrorists. Muslim religious leaders have refused to allow burial of the nine terrorists in Muslim cemeteries in Mumbai and across India, saying terrorists who attacked India should not be buried in "holy Indian soil".

"The terrorists do not deserve to be buried as Muslims because killing and harming anyone is not permitted in Islam," Mohammad Farooq, elderly owner of a perfume shop in Mohammad Ali Road, told Asia Times Online on a visit Mumbai's Muslim-majority area on December 3. "As a Muslim, I'm not even permitted to slap you."

The Mohammad Ali Road area, barely two kilometers away from the main railway station that terrorists struck a week ago, was bustling peacefully. Protest marchers, including many Muslims, had gathered across the city to denounce terrorists. There was no trace of tension, or fear of a communal backlash from the majority community.

"We Indian Muslims are happy and I have been here for 55 years," said perfume shop owner Farooq, who handed over a small booklet of the Koran. "People in Pakistan who wrongly think Muslims in India are suffering can come and see for themselves instead of believing propaganda."

As the evening sky blushed red to welcome the night, the strong fragrance from *attar* (flower-based perfume) shops mingled with

the smoky smell of kebabs and freshly baked bread and wafted through the congested, narrow cobblestone area of minarets and mosques, burqa-clad women and men in skull caps. This Muslim-majority area in the heart of Mumbai could be been mistaken for Old Delhi, Lahore, Karachi, Tehran, Istanbul or Baghdad.

"The tragedy is that most Muslims don't really read the Koran," said Younis, partner of Taj Publishers, near the Gulshan-e-Iran restaurant, which prints and exports copies of the Islamic holy book. "For 65 years in this work, I see people buying the Holy Book, but not reading it. Understanding it is far away."

Perhaps if Kasab the loose-lipped terrorist and his kind had tried to understand the Koran, the blood-soaked nightmare of November 26 might never have happened.

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