

How 10 men outgunned an entire city

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The bullet-proof jacket that apparently failed to save the life of Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad chief Hemant Karkare and CCTV pictures of a hapless Railway constable struggling to shoot at Ajmal Amir Kasab and Abu Ismail from his jammed carbine at CST station may be two among the more well-known instances where equipment used by security forces to rebuff the Lashkar-e-Toiba terrorists on 26/11 were not in sync with their raw courage.

However, the untold stories of the Mumbai Police, and even of the NSG and Central security agencies, not having access to equipment considered critical for any force fighting terror in modern times — or the expertise to effectively use what they have — make the high casualty figures seem like a disaster waiting to happen, particularly considering how vulnerable Mumbai is to terror attacks.

While the 10 Lashkar men came armed with an AK-47 each and ammunition to last them 60 hours and more, none of the 86 police stations in the city had a single AK-47 in its armoury that night. Only the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad's Quick Response Team (QRT) — a special squad of about 60 men formed in 2002 on the lines of the NSG — had automatic rifles that could match the terrorists' firepower.

However, with their chief killed within the first few hours of the attacks and the police force hit by a lack of leadership and direction, the QRT was nowhere in action during those crucial hours except at the CST. And even there, they hardly made a difference as Kasab and Ismail had fled the station when the QRT reached.

There was a very good chance of stopping them even before the QRT arrived, though. Railway police constable Ajit Kumar Nalawde had spotted the duo on one of the platforms and fired three rounds from his carbine but was forced to duck for cover when the fourth bullet got jammed inside the gun and the Lashkar terrorists began to retaliate.

The rest of Mumbai Police, who chased the attackers through the corridors of the Taj Mahal hotel or fought pitched battles with them at the Cama Hospital or by the beach at Chowpatty, had to trust their archaic 303 rifles or SLRs, 9 mm pistols or carbines, or even hopelessly outdated muskets.

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Only a few officers were armed with the more sophisticated Glock pistols acquired by the Mumbai Police in 2004, and even fewer IPS officers were armed with AK-47 assault rifles in the first few hours. Moreover, most of the policemen on the streets during the attacks were out of practice as far as firing a weapon was concerned. According to internal orders issued regularly by the Mumbai Police, officers are required to attend firing practice at one of its two firing ranges just once a year.

A debate continues to rage in the Maharashtra Assembly on why the state government had not procured Grade III bulletproof vests that can stop AK-47 bullets fired from a specific distance, although the government has sought to defend the vests available saying those killed despite wearing the vests were all shot above their shoulders. But few, if any, have any explanation on why the only bulletproof vehicle that had been procured for the ATS only a month earlier was not used that night.

Equipment problems, however, were not the prerogative of just the Mumbai Police. The NSG, which is believed to have much of what Germany's elite counter-terrorism police unit GSG-9 uses, did not have night-vision devices needed to see during gunbattles inside the dark corridors of The Oberoi and the Taj or when operations were conducted at night. The NSG ended up borrowing the devices, which need to be charged, from the Mumbai Police on the night of November 27.

Ditto for gas grenades and gas masks. The NSG considered smoking out the terrorists inside the Taj as they were proving to be tough customers and again asked the Mumbai Police for gas grenades and masks on November 28. Mumbai Police Commissioner Hassan Gafoor sent three police control room vans, which routinely carry gas grenades, to the Taj after the stun grenades the NSG had used there proved ineffective. Eventually though, the gas grenades were not used for fear of collateral damage to the hostages.

As reported earlier in this series, the NSG also found the VHF communications sets used by the teams that went inside the heritage wing of the Taj did not work well due to the thick walls in the old building, often hampering communication between teams.

Again, security and intelligence agencies that were tapping the phones of the terrorists inside the Taj, the Oberoi and Nariman House did not use communication jammers, which are routinely available with all security forces, even though intercepted calls had shown that the Lashkar handlers in Pakistan were passing on crucial operational information to the attackers inside the buildings from within the first hours of the siege.

J K Dutt, the NSG chief during Operation Black Thunder, as the operations to flush out the Lashkar attackers was called, told the Editor-in-Chief of The Indian Express, Shekhar Gupta, in an interview for NDTV's Walk The Talk, that he surveyed the three sites within hours of the force arriving in Mumbai on November 27 and knew that a helicopter would probably be needed to insert commandos on the roof of Nariman House due to its location and inaccessibility.

Although it was not clear whether that operation would begin on the same day or the next day — it eventually began on November 28 due to delays in vacating neighbours from their houses — Dutt said a helicopter had been asked for on November 27 itself. Although there were helicopters available in Mumbai, they or the pilots were not the ones the NSG had trained with for such critical manoeuvres.

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Dutt said the training of the pilot is crucial as he needs to be able to hover the aircraft over a particular point for a considerable amount of time and also deal with the changing load of the chopper as the men climb out one after the other. The helicopter available in Mumbai, a Mi-70, also did not have a hatch on its floor which makes it easier for commandos to use a rope and slither down. Instead, they had to slither down from the sides.

There was a stiff breeze and the pilots had not even got a chance to do a recce even though the use of helicopters was anticipated almost 24 hours earlier. But the NSG had to make do with what it got.

It may have done better if it was at least aware about the existence in Mumbai of yet another critical high-tech gadget. The Mumbai Fire Department, which was on hand to douse fires at the Taj and The Oberoi complexes from the night of November 26, has for five years possessed state-of-the-art thermal cameras which track heat in a 20-metre radius and can help conclude if there is a human being or the possibility of an explosion or a fire in the vicinity even in near-zero visibility conditions.

Five such cameras were procured at a cost of Rs 3.5 lakh each and were at the sites of the siege. They were used twice, "minimally" in the words of Chief Fire Officer P Karguppikar, to help figure out fires inside the Taj on November 27 and 28. But the possibilities were much more.

Thermal cameras, which have a wireless monitoring screen and work on the principle of infrared imaging, can detect heat and higher temperatures, or a human body and also tell whether the body is unconscious or dead, based on its temperature.

This, sources told The Indian Express, could have been put to good use at Nariman House as it was eventually found that the Israeli hostages had been killed on the first night itself but operations were not launched to evict the Lashkar attackers until November 28. These cameras could have also been used from neighbouring buildings to pinpoint the presence of the two men inside Nariman House as the NSG commandos came down from the terrace after being inserted by a helicopter but did not know that the terrorists knew about their plans and were waiting for them, resulting in the death of Commando Gajendra Singh in the first face-off.

But the Fire Department was obviously not aware of such possibilities and the absence of an agency or a leader to co-ordinate various departments involved in the counter-terror operations meant the thermal cameras would remain a fire department secret.

"They were not aware of the availability of the equipment with us," a senior fire officer told The Indian Express, speaking on condition of anonymity. "So there was no question of giving it to anyone."