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Top Stories

Marcos - bravehearts who rescued Mumbai's hostages

New Delhi (IANS): They were the least known of the special forces commandos who were pressed into an anti-terrorist operation in Mumbai. But the 25-odd elite fighters of the Marcos - acronym for marine commandos - grabbed the national and international spotlight with their all-black overalls and faces masked by black cloth.

Dubbed the "bearded forces" because of the beards that the men sported and toting AK-47 assault rifles, Indian Navy's marine commandos follow in letter and spirit the adage of the counter-terrorism doctrine: Fight a militant like a militant.

Marcos, who are trained in executing covert operations, were called in along with the National Security Guard and Army commandos take on armed militants who were holding scores of people hostage inside two luxury hotels since Wednesday night. The militants had struck in at least 10 places in Mumbai, killing 125 people and injuring 327 people.

Two Marcos received injuries during "Operation Tornado" launched to flush out terrorists at the Taj Mahal Palace and Tower Hotel. Their operation continued till Friday.

"Trained sky divers and sea divers, the Marcos could sabotage enemy vessels and harbour installations. They can operate in beaches, coastal, jungles and ravines areas. Being divers, they can reach hostile shores swimming underwater," a senior Navy official told IANS on condition of anonymity.

Officially known as the Indian Marine Special Force, the unit was raised in 1987 out of the Naval divers to lead amphibious operations. The personnel volunteering for the force have to undergo a rigorous two-year training, by the end of which only 10-25 percent of the enrolled commandos remain.

Marcos have been active in Jammu and Kashmir as part of the Army's counter-terrorist efforts. Their main task is to control the infiltration of terrorists from across the border into Jammu and Kashmir through the Jhelum river and Wullar, a 65 square kilometer freshwater lake. Some Marcos personnel are also attached with the Army special forces units conducting counter-terrorism operations in the area.

They operate similar to the Israeli Mistaravim units sporting beards and wearing the 'pheren' (Kashmiri suit), thus making them indistinguishable from the locals, the official added.

Marcos have gained a fearsome reputation among terrorists who refer to them as the 'Dadiwali Fauj' (Bearded Army) since they are the only non-Sikh personnel allowed to grow beards, 'Jal Murgi' (Water Hens) for the speed, in which they carry out assault from the water and 'Magarmachh' (Crocodiles) for their amphibious capability.

Recently, the elite force earned accolades for the Indian Navy after they repulsed pirates attacks off the Somali coast on an Indian and a Saudi merchant vessel on November 11. In April 1986, the Indian Navy mooted a plan for a special force, which would be able to conduct reconnaissance, raids and even counter-terrorist operations in a maritime environment.

Three Naval officers were sent for training with the US Navy SEALs and further training was conducted with British Special Forces. These three Naval officers

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formed the nucleus of the Indian Marine Special Force (IMSF) that was formally raised in February 1987.

The strength of the unit is a closely guarded secret. However, sources say the number could be close to 2,000 personnel. Currently, there are three main groups attached to the three Naval commands - Mumbai (West), Cochin (South) and Vizag (East).

The unit's quick rise has changed its role - it was intended to be dedicated to special maritime operations, but a considerable part of Marcos is doubling up as marine infantry with the usual flexibility of commando forces.

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