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Snifex, room key scanners could have averted Taj, Oberoi blasts

Harsimran Singh, ET Bureau Dec 7, 2008, 12.00am IST

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NEW DELHI: The bombings last week at Mumbai's Oberoi Trident and Taj Mahal Hotels could have been averted if the luxury hotels would have deployed room key scanners.

According to Azam Amir Kasav, the terrorist caught by the Mumbai Police, they had stored large amount of explosives (about 15 kg of RDX), magazines and grenades in room 630 of Taj Mahal Hotel, which they had booked for four days. If the hotel had room key scanners in hotel elevators, terror attacks would have been avoided.

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Developed by Oak Ridge National Labs in US, which is under department of energy, mass spectrometry-based scanners can offer an analysis of up to 1,000 boarding passes or room access cards per hour. Currently used overseas in hi-security zones and a few airports, a passenger's boarding pass is passed through a device that detects even a billionth of a gram of explosives such as nitroglycerine or TNT. Mass spectrometry analyses the chemical composition of a sample based on the mass-to-charge ratio of charged particles in it.

The small device is used to scan the boarding pass before the passenger moves on to the aerobridge. Even if a tinge of explosives has been touched by a guest, it would alert the staff immediately. The information could have been passed on to IB and security agencies, instantly to avert the dastardly attacks. While a Taj Hotel & Resorts spokesperson refused to comment, an Oberoi official said that security has been beefed up now in all hotels. "Visitors not having a reservation or meeting in the hotel are generally not being allowed."

The official denied to comment on specific security devices being installed. Deployment of another explosive detection tool — Snifex — could also have averted attacks. "Snifex is a small handheld device with an aerial. The aerial starts pointing to the direction wherever explosive is kept. It can detect an explosive from a distance of a few metres," says Rajiv Mathur, Technology Head, GroupM Securities. There are about 100 types of explosives known today. While Snifex can sniff about 60 types of explosives (through vapours), a sniffer dog can sniff about 90 types. But the disadvantage with sniffer dogs is that they can operate at peak efficiency only for about 30 minutes. Thus, there are many groups of dogs taken when searching for an explosive. One group is rested for ten minutes and the other takes over.

Snifex is not deployed in busy markets because it starts pointing at anything inflammable—taking petrol tanks in cars also into account. However, Snifex could have been deployed easily in Taj hotel lobby or railway stations. The deployment of new age explosive detection tools in the luxury hotels would have saved at least 183 lives.

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