

A Year Since 26/11: OP Black Tornado: A Case Study

Following is the report of a presentation, "Urban Counter Terrorism Operations: OP Black Tornado-A Case Study" by Maj Gen Abhaya Gupta, SM, VSM, IG (Ops), NSG (now retired) held at the United Service Institution of India, New Delhi, on 4 March, 2009.

Opening address by Lt Gen PK Singh, PVSM, AVSM (Retd), Director, USI:

Lt Gen PK Singh reflected that the subject "Urban Counter Terrorism Operations" is a very apt and hot topic for discussion worldwide, especially since 26/11. The potential and probability of such un-conventional attacks taking place in any part of the world is a potent threat today, and hence the need for understanding the nature and environment of such a warfare in an urban setting and to counter it, The Royal United Services Institute in the UK held a seminar shortly after the Mumbai attack, realizing the need for comprehending such scenarios and the RAND corporation in the US had also sought inputs from USI on the response mechanism of the Indian security agencies to the Mumbai attack.

Lt Gen Noble Thamburaj, PVSM, SM, VCOAS (now retired):

Lt Gen Thamburaj asserted that it would be unfair to categorize that the entire country was held to ransom for 60 hours during the Mumbai attacks, though certain machineries of the government had stopped functioning. The army and the NSG had to assume and get on with the job, as no clear picture of the unfolding situation was presented by people already on the ground. Dwelling on the role played by the media, he believed that it was in fact, very well behaved and had not crossed the 'Lakshman Rekha' assigned to it or had hindered operations in any way. The media had done a service to the nation by bringing the operations to the centre stage and forced the government to take hard decisions.

Maj Gen Abhaya Gupta, SM, VSM, IG (Ops), NSG

Part-I: 'Operation Black Tornado'- The Mumbai Operations.

On the night of 26 November 2008, firing incidents had taken place at various locations in Mumbai. Initial reports suggested a gang-war taking place. However, in a few hours, it was confirmed to be a terrorist situation.

In an encounter with the Mumbai Police, one terrorist had been killed and one captured alive.

The National Security Guard (NSG) was inducted into Mumbai at 0300 h on 27 November 2008 after covering a distance of 1163 Km from New Delhi by air transport.

Initially two targets were identified- The Taj Palace hotel and the Oberoi- Trident in South Mumbai. Accordingly, forces were divided into two parts, under the command of DIG (Ops) NSG and Deputy Force Commander, 51 SAG.

Preliminary briefing was provided by Mumbai Police and the hotel staff.

Accretions were being flown in for simultaneous operations.

Later, a terrorist situation was confirmed at a third location- the Nariman house, hence the task force was further divided into three sub-task forces, one each for the Taj, Oberoi-Trident and the Nariman house.

The second contingent arrived on 27 November and the third along with support elements on 28 November.

The Task Force comprised of 195 army personnel drawn from the 51 and 52 Special Action Groups (SAG).

Two sniper detachments from the Taj were sent to the Nariman House to pin down the terrorists present there, within the building.

The operational strategy was to neutralize the terrorists through 'shock' action using varied methods of insertions and tactical manoeuvring:-

- Using small 'HIT' teams of 5 personnel each.
- Inter and Intra Co-ordination and Communication.
- Top-down innovative tactics.
- Use overwhelming small arms fire to pin down the terrorists.
- Render safe procedure (RSP) to sanitize and secure the buildings.

Operations at the Taj Towers and the Taj Palace Hotel

Layout: The Taj Palace Hotel

- Length of each corridor per floor is about 840 ft, total length of the hotel being about 1.80 Kms.
- Total area- 49,1400 sq.ft.
- 330 rooms, 2-3 rooms in each suite, 140 miscellaneous rooms including generator plants, etc. (in the basement), 17 suites in each floor.

Layout of The Taj Towers:

- 21 floors with with 17 rooms in each floor.
- Total rooms - 323.

Difficulties in Conducting Operations

- Time to break open, enter and conduct quick search of one room took four-five minutes, for 500 rooms- 33-40 hrs,50-63 hrs for the Taj Towers alone.
- Inside the building only 200 SAG personnel operated.
- Large area of operations, ensuring safety of guests/ civilians.
- Thick granite walls of the Taj nullified effectiveness of rocket fire, hence were not used.
- Only one master key was available, hence doors had to be broken open.
- Limited hotel staff was available, no knowledge of various small rooms in the corridors which could be used as hiding places.
- Lack of ambient light inside the rooms and the curtains were drawn from inside.
- Occupants were too scared and never identified themselves or opened the doors

upon knocking or calling. Some occupants had ventured out of their rooms earlier and were shot by the terrorists, word of this incident had spread quickly and the hotel staff had advised the guests to shut themselves inside their rooms.

At 0920 h on 27 November, the NSG took over operations from the MARCOS and obtained the hotel layout plan. The Taj Chambers and the restaurants were cleared and secured first. At the Taj Palace, the ground floor was secured and the OP base was set up there.

Top-down operations were launched by approaching the terrace from the service stairs.

Inputs had suggested that two terrorists were present inside the Taj. Contact was established at the first floor during floor clearance. Fire was coming from two terrorists from the left corner of the corridor.

One SAG commando got injured in the middle of the staircase leading to the first floor. It was then that Maj Sandeep Unnikrishnan pulled him down to the basement and asked his squad to stay there and charged the staircase himself, firing at the terrorists. At this moment, two more terrorists unexpectedly fired from the right corner of the first floor corridor, injuring Maj Unnikrishnan. He later succumbed to his injuries.

Eventually, the four terrorists got cornered at the Wasabi restaurant on the first floor.

Due to the wooden spiral staircases and granite walls of the bar, they were immune to NSG fire. IEDs were used to blast open entry into the restaurant and due to the blast effect and shock waves created, one terrorist jumped out of the window and was shot. The rest died inside the restaurant.

Operations at the Oberoi-Trident

Layout:

11 floors, with 33 rooms on each floor, three interlinking corridor at three levels (floors) with the Trident Hotel.

Unlike the Taj, the two terrorists here were not pro-active and after the initial shooting of guests on 26 November, lied low in a room. They opened fire only once while changing their location and on another occasion when fired at. They were fixed in room number 1856 which was opened using a master key and fire was drawn from the terrorists. One terrorist was killed while escaping near the lift on the corridor, while the other hid himself inside the bathroom. Later, it was ascertained that he was defiladed from own fire from outside as he had moved into the bathtub.

The Oberoi hotel was cleared by 1400 h on 28 November, and after render safe procedure, handed over to the civil police at 1800 h on 29 November.

Operations at Nariman House

Nariman House is located in a densely populated neighbourhood in South Mumbai. Inhabited by Jews, even residents of the area had no access to it, nor did

anyone possess any knowledge of the layout inside.

Sniper detachments were positioned on the surrounding buildings, and the command base was set up near an under-construction building, which provided the vantage point to bring down observed fire on the Nariman House.

The terrorists while moving in had broken the window panes of the house which lay strewn on the ground. Therefore, the sound emanating from the broken glasses alerted the terrorists and would then bring down effective fire on the approaching commandos.

The building had iron grills on all sides and the curtains were drawn from inside. The terrorists had blasted the inner staircase connecting the floors, however could not prevent the commandos from negotiating them.

The maid while escaping with baby Moshe, informed that the terrorists had moved over to the adjacent Merchant House. At one time, the locals had speculated on the possibility of six terrorists including a female being present inside.

Owing to such mixed inputs, the clearance of all neighbouring buildings became a necessity and operations commenced on the intervening night of 27/28 November.

The signal intercept provided by the Mumbai Police, revealed the terrorists shooting down the remaining two female hostages, who had already been shot earlier.

The force was divided into an assault group, which slithered down the helicopter at 0715 h on 28 November, while the support element brought down observed fire on the building. There was no time for rehearsals.

The sixth and the fifth floors were cleared first and contact was established with the terrorists at 0800 h on the fourth floor.

It was at this moment, when Hav Gajender Singh, while attempting to break into the room from the front door was fired upon by the two terrorists from divergent locations inside the room.

After this attempt, another entry point was created using an IED. Co-ordinated fire was brought down from two sides now, ie, the front door and the broken wall, while the commandos moved into the room and neutralized both the terrorists. The objective was cleared by 1825 h on 28 November.

Summary

In all, eight terrorists were killed during the operation by the NSG and a total of 610 hostages/guests rescued from all the three locations.

The NSG suffered two fatal and 18 non-fatal casualties.

PART-II: Challenges Ahead

The various shortcomings and lessons learnt from the Mumbai incident:-

- Traditional thinking on conflict management needs to change.
- Failure of co-operation and synergised effort between various agencies.
- Lack of any broad-vision, higher level direction, communication and

co-ordination.

- Is there an active role for higher commanders in Counter-terrorist operations and if so what should it be?
- With the new urban terror environment, the troops to task ratio needs to be discussed; essential need for reserves at each level, for quick insertion and re-deployment.
- With Urban terror terrain undergoing a sea change from single/double storey buildings to malls, hotels, offices, etc. with multiple entry points, there is a need to evolve new tactics and techniques to counter terror.
- How do we ensure minimum casualties; more time it takes, more is the pressure to accomplish the task, whereas in moving swiftly there is a risk of incurring casualties.
- Need to generate tactical intelligence for which suitable finances and resources be made readily available.
- Radio communication problems- more hand held sets are required.
- Hostage- terrorist identification was a problem.

Recommendations/ Milestones to be achieved

- Need for a better synergy between the centre and the states.
- Launch multi-faceted and integrated operations.
- State governments should be made more accountable, since law and order is a state subject.
- Enhance professionalism of state forces.
- There should be a clear channel of Operational command.
- National Policy should be in line with Constitutional provisions.
- Harmonise all instruments of National Power- Start from a position of strength- military operations, but compliment it with political solutions.
- Need for a media policy – Start was made, but left mid-way.
- Take steps to deter/dissuade our neighbours from indulging in such attacks.

Discussion

- What should be the role of the army and should garrison units take own initiative and respond to such situations as had emerged in Mumbai? Ghatak platoons can be trained and made available to localise the terrorists, till such time as specialised forces arrive.
- Should the army get involved in an urban terror environment? The actual assault is always carried out by the army as CPMFs are not adequately trained and equipped to deal with such situations. Even in Mumbai, the first responders, in the initial few hours had failed to 'fix' the terrorists at one location and isolate them.
- The scope of employing chemical agents against terrorists has been studied by the NSG, but since they release odour and are found to be harmful to some categories of people, such as heart patients, old people, etc, it cannot be employed in a wide area where all kinds of people are present.
- NSG has no authority to jam mobile/radio communication and lacks the equipment to block transmissions in larger areas, even in case of airline hijacking; no consensus has been evolved to jam transmission.

- The helicopter assault on Nariman House could not be launched at night due to lacking of night avionics capability in helicopters. In the morning the operation was delayed due to hazy weather conditions.
- Diversion for other tasks is distracting the SAG from its primary role. Is police culture in NSG diminishing its ethos, and therefore should it be under Police control?
- Intelligence agencies need to be made more accountable and brought under Parliamentary oversight. Developing Human intelligence capabilities is the key to prevent terror attacks.

Conclusion

The presentation was well attended by the officers of the service headquarters and veteran officers. It provided an authentic and precise account of the operations carried out in Mumbai, coming as it did from the horse's mouth, i.e. the IG (Ops) NSG, who operated from Ops rooms established at the Taj and Nariman Point. The debate generated led to pertinent issues being addressed. The new terror environment and the growing liberalism in society is presenting numerous soft targets to the barbaric terrorists who are a much different and a highly indoctrinated and motivated lot. They come with a pre-meditated will to die and hence look to inflict maximum casualties. Therefore, capturing such ruthless and radical bunch of terrorists is well nigh impossible and neutralizing them before they wreak havoc is a challenge facing all counter-terrorist agencies including the elite NSG. There is a need to change and re-orient our tactics to deal with such a lot of terrorists and at the same time minimize own casualties.

Lest We Forget

**Maj Sandeep Unnikrishnan, AC, 7 BIHAR, 51 SAG (Posthumous)
Hav Gajender Singh, AC, 10 PARA (SF), 51 SAG (Posthumous)**

The 51 and 52 Special Action Groups of the NSG were conferred with 1 Kirti Chakra, 1 Shaurya Chakra, 6 Sena Medals (Gallantry), 1 Sena Medal (Distinguished) and 1 COAS Commendation Card for OP Black Tornado.

(Report prepared by Rohit Singh, Research Assistant, CLAWS)

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