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Mumbai attacks: Why is Pakistan charging suspects now?

One year after the Mumbai attacks, seven Pakistanis were charged with conducting the assault in India. But few analysts see a quick thaw in India-Pakistani relations.

By Issam Ahmed, *Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor* / November 25, 2009



People light candles at a vigil for the victims of last year's militant attacks outside the Taj Mahal hotel in Mumbai on Wednesday.

Punit Paranjpe/Reuters

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ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN

A Pakistan court charged seven people Wednesday with participating in last year's Mumbai terrorist attacks. The indictments came one day ahead of the first anniversary of the three-day assault on India's financial hub that left more than 165 people dead.

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The timing of the proceedings, which were closed to the public, is intended as a message to the international community that Pakistan is serious about cracking down on terrorists, according to analysts. It is unlikely, however, that this step alone will lead to the resumption of official dialogue between Pakistan and India, which was suspended in the aftermath of the attack.

Noting that the timing of the indictment appeared to be "manufactured," Hasan-Askari Rizvi, a Lahore-based political analyst says: "These people have been in detention for almost 11 months. The timing suggests Pakistan wants to send out a message that they are pursuing the people responsible."

The indictments come at a time of heightened tensions between India and Pakistan. Also on Wednesday, a spokesman for the Pakistani Foreign Office accused India of "preparing for a limited war" and pleaded with the international community to take notice of India's "long-term intentions."

The statement was offered in response to remarks reportedly made by Indian Army Chief Gen. Deepak Kapoor, during a seminar, that the possibility of a limited nuclear war was "very much a reality in South Asia" and that India was preparing for that possibility.

A week ago, India handed Pakistan a fresh dossier accusing Pakistan's "official agencies" of having a hand in the Mumbai attacks.

The alleged mastermind of the attacks, Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, was among the seven men indicted in court Wednesday, as was Hamid Amin Sadiq, alleged to be a key handler of the Mumbai attackers.

All seven have pleaded "not guilty," and the next court hearing will occur on Dec. 5, the defendant's lawyer Shahbaz Rajput told news agencies. Nine other suspects (who are not in Pakistani custody) were named in the indictments, including the lone-surviving gunman from the attacks, Muhammed Ajmal Qasab, a Pakistani who is currently facing trial in India.

Today's charges were the first that Pakistan has brought against suspects connected to the Nov. 26-29 siege, which targeting luxury hotels, a Jewish center, a railway station, and a restaurant.

However, veteran Pakistani journalist and author of "Descent into Chaos" Ahmed Rashid says the move is unlikely to make "much of a difference" to relations between the two nuclear powers. India suspended peace talks with Pakistan following the attack, and in July Indian PM Manmohan Singh said official dialogue would not resume until all those responsible had been brought to justice.

"Pakistan says it wants to resume dialogue. India is saying ban LeT [Lashkar-e-Taiba, an Islamist militant group], and then we can resume the dialogue," says Mr. Rashid, adding that this "all or nothing approach" makes it difficult to move forward.

India has provided Islamabad with a total of five dossiers on the Mumbai attacks since

December 2008, while Pakistan's interior minister Rehman Malik has repeatedly asked India to provide more evidence to prosecute the suspects.

Among India's demands are that Pakistan hand over LeT founder Hafiz Saeed, who remains a free man in Lahore after two court cases against him by the government were overturned. Neither case, however, accused him of being involved directly involved in the Mumbai attacks.

Mr. Rizvi, the analyst, blames Indian authorities for not providing enough evidence beyond statements made by Qassab, the lone-surviving attacker, and recordings of intercepted phone calls in which the word "Hafiz" was used.

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