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Modernising the NSG

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Mumbai exposed the inadequacies of our best anti-terror force

The National Security Guard (NSG) was raised on the lines of Germany's GSG-9 in 1986 as India's elite anti-hijacking, anti-terror and bomb disposal force. Today, it is better known as a force that provides security cover to VVIPs.

The Mumbai attacks has put the focus back on NSG's capabilities and revealed that the elite force is beset with the usual problems that India's uniformed personnel remain mired in for decades—archaic equipment and weaponry, procurements hauled up in the long waiting list with the nodal Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA).

The nation's top-notch terror fighting force 51 SAG, is manned entirely by army men, as is the 52 SAG, the anti-hijack squad. Equipment, manpower, training—you name it, and the NSG is lagging behind. The larger part of their equipment is aging and in state of disrepair. The sniper rifles that SAG uses, the Heckler and Koch PSG1, have not been replaced or upgraded since NSG's inception, basic equipment like collapsible ladders haven't been procured as yet. (see box)

"Who should be deciding what to buy? We, who put our life on the firing line, or the MHA, that has neither the expertise nor the willingness?" asks a major who participated in the Mumbai operations. "We would have saved both our men in Mumbai operations if we had state-of-the-art equipment," he adds. That's a serious allegation but the MHA exudes familiar bureaucratic apathy.

What the NSG lacks

Transport is pathetic; the force does not have armoured vehicles for operations in the urban environment

Former home minister Shivraj Patil made tall promises that were never met. "We have to simplify the procedure for buying arms and other weaponry for various forces so that they are fully equipped. We cannot let our forces lag behind terrorists," Patil said on the 23rd Raising Day parade of the NSG in October 2007. The reason was provided by a joint secretary of the ministry,

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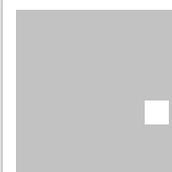
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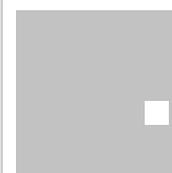
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Bulletproof clothing (Level 4)

bullets that terrorists use and bulletproof helmets with inbuilt communication devices and night vision equipment

Light and collapsible metal ladders for operational purposes

Radar imaging equipment to see through walls and anti-material rifles to penetrate them

Situational awareness equipment like radio sets with in-built GPS chips

Small explosive charges to open holes in walls and blow up locks for strategic entries

State-of-the-art versions of sniper rifles, hand grenades and other weaponry

“Why would any official go out of way to secure matter.” Arun Bhagat, former IB chief does not agree, “If the procurement is transparent, there is no room for doubt.”

Add to this 50 and 20 per cent vacancies in its SRG and SAG wings respectively and the picture gets grimmer. This shortage of manpower was felt in Mumbai operations, the 51 SAG fell short of the numbers and 52 SAG was summoned as reinforcement. This raises another question: If a similar attack was carried out at some other place simultaneously, what would the response be? “We do not have an answer,” says a Lieutenant Colonel of the NSG.

According to NSG sources, the reason for ‘avoidable delay’ by 10 long nagging hours in reaching the scene of mayhem was that the plane, an IL-76, that was to carry 51 SAG personnel to Mumbai had to wait for hours for some VVIPs who were to travel on the same flight.

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Despite the delay, the NSG rescued more than 600 hostages in 48 hours during the Mumbai operation and eight well-trained and equipped terrorists were ‘taken out’ in a highly restrictive urban environment, under live media coverage, with two NSG casualties. Describing the situation, the experts say, “the boys are good; force needs improvement.”

To avoid such delays the MHA has announced setting up of regional NSG centres at Kolkata, Hyderabad and Mumbai or Nagpur. This has raised apprehensions that how will the government arrange for 4,000 additional trained men for these new regional centres without compromising the recruitment standards?

Despite constantly redesigning courses and drills, training still remains a major concern. Insiders agree that the training is very inward looking with no new ideas being infused in operational tactics by sharing experiences and interacting with the specialised anti-terror squads from other countries. As a result NSG operations have become predictable. “In Mumbai operation, the terrorists knew how we operate,” says a lieutenant colonel.

This is a wake-up call from the disgruntled members of this elite force, a call that cannot be ignored. The NSG is the sword arm of the nation’s war on terror and it’s got to be sharp, and more than ever before.

ACTION PLAN

SETTING up a ‘Special Operations Command’ on the lines of the US or Israel with its own dedicated aircraft, helicopter in readiness

SPEEDY and task-based procurement of equipment for

NSG should not be clubbed with general procurement for other paramilitary forces

COUNTER-TERROR operations in an urban environment call for regular training in real situations and intensive interaction with such parallel forces across the world

COMING up of regional centres should not lead to the force being spread too thin

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