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Mumbai attack: failures of command

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A leaderless police force was left to cope with the situation as best as it could.

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The official investigation into the Mumbai attacks shows that poor leadership crippled the police on 26/11.

Late last year, Mumbai Police Commissioner D. Sivanandan sat across the table with a small group of senior officials to discuss just what had gone wrong with his force on November 26, 2008 - and what needed to be done to make sure mistakes which cost the lives of hundreds never happened again. Even as the meeting was under way, Mr. Sivanandan's predecessor made known his views in a magazine interview.

The former Commissioner, Hasan Gafoor, charged several officers with refusing to "take on the terrorists:" notably Joint Commissioner in-charge of law and order K.L. Prasad, Crime Branch Additional Commissioner Deven Bharati, southern region Additional Commissioner K. Venkatesham and Anti-Terrorism Squad Additional Commissioner of Police Param Bir Singh. The officers, Mr. Gafoor said, "did not appear keen on responding to the situation."

The facts on which he founded his criticism remain unclear. The former civil servant, Ram Pradhan, and the retired intelligence officer, V. Balachandran, who carried out an official investigation of police responses to the November tragedy, noted: "No formal de-briefing sessions were held by the Commissioner of Police with all [or] groups of officers to make an assessment of what went wrong."

But from the depositions made before the Pradhan-Balachandran committee, we do have some idea of just what happened in the first few hours of the attack - and the key role of Mr. Gafoor's own leadership in that tragic debacle.

Gross violations

Mr. Gafoor told the committee that he first learned of the firing at the Leopold Café at 9.50 p.m. To him "it appeared like a military-type professional attack." He "at first wondered whether it was a reaction to the Malegaon arrest [of Hindutva terrorists by the ATTS]".

Even as Mr. Gafoor made his way to the Leopold, he received reports of fighting at the Oberoi and Trident hotels. For reasons that are unclear, the Police Commissioner decided "to stay near that and set up his base of operations." "On reaching the scene," Mr. Gafoor told the committee, "he started giving instructions to his officers on his priorities which were pinning down the terrorists, preventing their escape, saving lives and removing [the] injured to the hospitals." Many - including journalists - saw Mr. Gafoor in the backseat of his bullet-proof car as fighting raged around him.

The Pradhan-Balachandran findings make clear that Mr. Gafoor was guilty of gross violations of standard operating procedures. Plans drawn up by the Mumbai Police in 2006 mandated that Mr. Prasad, with overall charge of the city's police stations, ought to have taken charge of the control room. Instead, that task was assigned to Crime Branch Rakesh Maria.

Mr. Gafoor himself, the committee said, "should have been in the command centre of the control room, which might have helped in better utilisation of forces." It noted a "certain lack of cohesion and communication in the internal

functioning of the Mumbai Police Commissioner's office."

Police officers who testified before the committee appeared to have shared that assessment. Param Bir Singh found himself engaged in fighting at the Oberoi-Trident complex minutes after fighting broke out there. Positioned above the hotel atrium, the Lashkar-e-Taiba assault team was able to repel police efforts to enter the buildings. Later, a bomb that went off in the Oberoi lobby set off fires, making an assault impossible.

Director-General of Police A.N. Roy, Mr. Singh told the committee, helped to develop an alternative response. Mr. Roy persuaded residents of the upmarket National Centre for the Performing Arts Building to evacuate their flats, giving the police a line of fire into the upper floors of the Oberoi-Trident complex. The police position in the NCPA was later to become a key element in the National Security Guard's final storming of the building. Mr. Gafoor, who parked himself just below the NCPA, does not appear to have had any role in the Oberoi-Trident fighting.

Mr. Roy, the committee recorded, consistently provided advice and assistance to senior officials, even though he "had no operational responsibility in view of the jurisdiction of the Commissioner of Police in Mumbai."

Improvised response

For the most part, though, the leaderless force was left to cope with the situation as best as it could. Azad Maidan division Assistant Commissioner Issaq Ibrahim Bagwan battled the terrorists inside the Nariman House, keeping them pinned down till the afternoon of November 27, when the NSG finally arrived. Helped by only a small unit of Maharashtra's reserve police, he "cordoned off the area and moved out at least 300 people," the Pradhan-Balachandran report records.

From the evacuated buildings, Mr. Bagwan exchanged fire with the terrorists - an action which likely helped Sandra Samuels escape the building with infant Moshe Holzberg. He received no recorded backup from his Police Commissioner.

Bad leadership also led to the mishandling of the one force which could have facilitated a sharper police response - the ATS Quick Response Teams stationed in Mumbai. The Quick Response Teams were poorly trained. But the men did have some elementary combat training.

However, the committee found, the Quick Response Teams were dispersed over multiple locations, depending on the demands of local commanders - a violation of a cardinal tenet of special forces operations.

Mr. Gafoor's decision to station himself at the NCPA also cut the Police Commissioner off from critical intelligence flows. Intelligence sources say Mr. Bharati - who earlier served with the Intelligence Bureau - was summoned after the authorities first picked up conversations by the terrorists in the Taj Mahal Hotel and their controllers in Pakistan.

Direction-finding equipment deployed by the Intelligence Bureau in Mumbai suggested, incorrectly, that the mobile phones being used by the terrorists were located along the Colaba causeway. Mr. Bharati was assigned charge of conducting room-by-room searches in the many budget hotels in the area, before communications-intelligence experts were finally able to determine that the phones were inside the Taj.

Later, Mr. Bharati played a key role in the fighting inside the Taj. In tapes obtained by The Hindu, he can be heard attempting to deceive the handlers by claiming to be a hotel waiter who had been handed a mobile phone by an injured terrorist, and asking for instructions - an effort to create confusion in the control room.

For his part, the committee records, Mr. Venkatesham took charge of the evacuation of injured hotel guests and bystanders at the Taj, as well as the task of facilitating the movement of police and fire brigade units.

Many of the targets -among them, the Leopold, the Taj, the Nariman House and area outside the Chattrapati Shivaji Terminus - were in Mr. Venkatesham's area of responsibility. There was simply no way he could have been present at all these venues.

Ironically enough, Mr. Gafoor - who was transferred to a low-profile post in the wake of the Pradhan-Balachandran findings - could well have a chance to lead the force he failed again. In May, he will be among three officers to take over from Mr. Roy, who currently holds office as Maharashtra Director-General of Police.

Keywords: [Mumbai attacks](#), [26/11](#), [Ajmal Kasab](#), [Mumbai Police Commissioner](#), [D. Sivanandan](#), [Hasan Gafoor](#)