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26 alerts failed to prevent 26/11

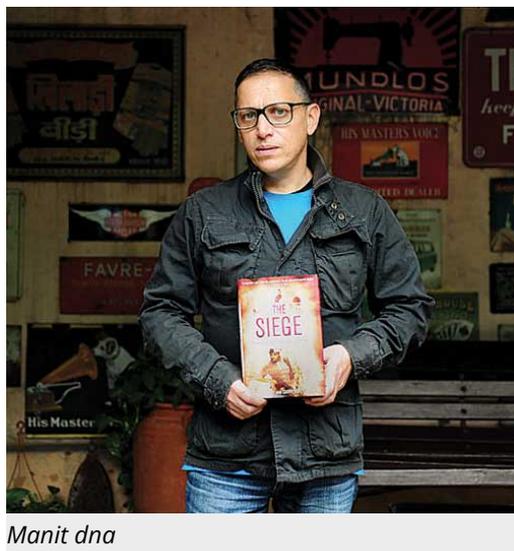
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Iftikhar Gilani

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Just Three weeks before attacks, Taj hotel had let security picket go: Book.



Manit dna

Scores of people killed in the terror attacks on November 26, 2008, could have been saved, had the Taj Mahal Palace management agreed to provide food to security guards manning pickets outside the tower lobby.

Three weeks before the Pakistan-based outfit Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) struck Mumbai, the Taj management had let the security picket go because the guards had demanded food while on duty.

This is just one in a series of tragic lapses exposed in *The Siege*, a book by British investigative journalists Adrian Levy and

Cathy Scott-Clark. There were 26 intelligence alerts, the authors have said while reconstructing the November 26 to 29 terror strike. The alerts were so precise that deputy commissioner of police Vishwas Nangre Patil conducted a security drill with the Taj staff in October 2008. However, the security steps were dismantled as soon he went on leave.

According to the authors, the **26/11** attack by the LeT was distinct in that almost everybody, including the CIA, India's Intelligence Bureau (IB) and Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and even the Taj management knew of the impending calamity. But little was done to stave off the attack in which 166 people were killed.



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"The inability of RAW to work with IB, and the rivalry between the national bureaus and the state ones... The police too were ineffective and unsupported until July 2008 when DCP Vishwas Nangre Patil decided to piece together the intelligence and came to the immediate conclusion that Mumbai was about to be hit and that the Taj, Leopold Cafe and other places were the targets," Levy told **dna**.

As Indian agencies dealt with the intelligence inputs, back in the US and Pakistan even the wives and family of plotter Pakistani origin American **David Coleman Headley** got a whiff of the attack. One of his wives Faiza approached the US mission in **Islamabad** and briefed the officials about Headley's frequent Mumbai trips. But, her complaint was dismissed as a domestic tiff. The IB mole within the LeT training centre in Pakistan had also tipped off the agency about a possible attack on May 24 and then on August 11.

Tracing the footmarks of Headley, a CIA and US drug enforcement mole, Levy and Scott-Clark claim he had originally conceived the idea of attacks and offered help to the ISI as a trade-off to release him from detention. He was caught by Pakistani security agencies while illegally touring the tribal region bordering Afghanistan. In a race to catch up with **Osama bin Laden** five months after 9/11, CIA operators asked Headley to 'join' the LeT, many of whose cadres were also orbiting around al Qaeda. He had set up two offices in Mumbai in 2006, the Reliance cyber café near Churchgate station and another at the Immigration Law Centre in Tardeo a/c market. Initially, the LeT's old guard was against becoming part of global jihad and wanted to concentrate only on Kashmir. But a faction within the outfit was arguing to shift focus to **Afghanistan** and to take on US forces to compete with Taliban.

The main planner Zaki-u-Rahman Lakhvi in an e-mail had conceded serious problems in holding the Lashkar together. "The outfit needed to pull something out of the hat, an operation that would bind everyone together," write Levy and Scott. The suggestion to attack the Chabad was fiercely opposed by the old guard but was included at the insistence of 16 Indians recruited by LeT, including Zabiuddin known as Chohay (mice) in the camp.

Delay in NSG deployment

The 26/11 attack, states the book, is not only about overlooking intelligence but also the security management and the delay in the deployment of National Security Guard (NSG). Referring to the forensic account prepared by Black Cat commandos based in Manesar in Haryana, the authors say they were unofficially mobilised at 10.05pm on November 26, just 22 minutes after the first shots were fired in Mumbai. But 70 minutes later, they were warned by cabinet secretary KM Chandrasekhar and later by a joint secretary (internal security) against mobilisation without orders. At 12.34am, the then home secretary Madhukar Gupta, gave the go-ahead to NSG chief Jyoti Dutt.

But at the Delhi airport, they were informed that the transport plane was 156 miles away in Chandigarh. Dutt called RAW to lend an Ilyushin-76 aircraft. But the plane had not been fuelled.

When Dutt called the home secretary at 1am, he found that he was himself stranded in Pakistan where he had gone for talks. Finally when the plane landed in Mumbai at 5.30am the next day and by the time NSG took charge, terrorists were in complete control.

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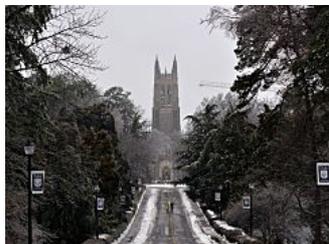
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