



What went wrong: The inside story

Shishir Gupta Posted online: Fri Dec 26 2008, 11:21 hrs

The Intelligence failure in the run-up to the November 26 attacks and the crossed wires during the 60-hour siege: **Shishir Gupta** reconstructs

A day after P Chidambaram took over as the Union Home Minister, National Security Advisor M K Narayanan, Home Secretary Madhukar Gupta, Intelligence Bureau Director P C Haldar and Maharashtra Director General of Police A K Roy met in his chamber to discuss the Mumbai terror attacks. Roy is said to have told them that the public was “extremely angry” and that India should militarily retaliate against Pakistan in order to teach them a lesson.

Later that evening, the top bureaucrats, without the minister, assembled again in Gupta's room. With the NSA listening, Roy asked Haldar why the November 20 intelligence alert on a Lashkar-e-Toiba ship, given to the Coast Guard and Naval Headquarters, was not passed on to the Mumbai Police. Haldar bluntly replied that the Mumbai Police could do nothing on the high seas, clearly indicating that the Navy and the Coast Guard had failed to deliver.

The alerts sent by the IB in the past three years to the Mumbai Police and the action taken were again discussed threadbare at a meeting in Nagpur on December 19 between Roy, newly sworn in Maharashtra Chief Minister Ashok Chavan and State Home Minister Jayant Patil. There was concurrence on the need to have a high-level inquiry, which could be headed by R D Pradhan, who was home secretary under former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, with V Balachandran, former special secretary of the Research and Analysis Wing, and Ajit Nimbalkar, former Maharashtra chief secretary, as members.

What is evident in the flurry of meetings, from New Delhi to Nagpur, is the growing realisation that on November 26 night, all systems that could have prevented a 26/11 failed.

INTELLIGENCE

Even on the morning of 26/11, a communication asking for activation of 10 SIM cards was picked up by the R&AW on the Bangladesh border. Intelligence agencies failed to decipher its significance. At 9.21 pm, the attack began

IB chief Haldar and his R&AW counterpart Ashok Chaturvedi failed to act on the top-secret alert (see the scanned document below) sent to then Maharashtra DG P S Pasricha on November 20, 2007. Haldar wrote to Pasricha that reliable inputs indicated that the LeT was planning a major terrorist strike and the action might involve “fidayeen attack, stand-off firing and use of grenades”. Even though the exact target had not been disclosed, he added, the operation could involve taking hostages. Asking the DG to sensitise his officers, Haldar promised to revert “as soon as” more information was available. Even as Special Director, Multi-Agency



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Centre (MAC), Haldar had written to Pasricha on August 7, 2006, and given details of specific targets in Maharashtra.

However, Haldar never reverted back to Pasricha, despite the promise, till four days after the Marriot Hotel bombing in Islamabad. On September 20, 2008, Joint Director (MAC) IB Ashok Prasad alerted the Maharashtra DG (the scanned document on top) that the LeT was planning an attack in Mumbai and identified Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, Vallabhbhai Patel Stadium, Sea Rock or Taj Land's End Hotel, Mumbai Juhu airfield and JW Marriot Hotel as likely targets.

The scene now shifted to Delhi and the US, through established intelligence channels, alerted R&AW Joint Secretary A K Dashmana in a November 18, 2008, meeting that an LeT ship was trying to infiltrate into Indian waters. It also gave latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates of the vessel. This input was passed on to the IB for dissemination to the respective agencies. Joint Director Prabhakar Alok forwarded the input to the Naval Headquarters and the Coast Guard for action.

While the Naval Headquarters never passed on the intelligence to its sword-arm, the Western Navy, the Coast Guard launched a search for the suspected LeT vessel on November 21 dawn. As the provided coordinates by the US Intelligence put the vessel 20-30 miles south of Karachi, the Coast Guard never found the ship. Its officers not only wrote a letter to IB Joint Director Alok but also called him up in a bid to get more intelligence. Alok promised to revert, but like his boss never did.

Even on the morning of 26/11, a communication asking for activation of 10 SIM cards was picked up by the R&AW on the Bangladesh border. Intelligence agencies failed to decipher its significance. At 9.21 pm, the attack began, with Ajmal Kasab and Ismail Khan opening fire at the CST Terminus. The Mumbai Police top brass was at the time making their way to Oberoi Trident to attend a wedding.

POLICE

A price was paid for the division of authority between the Mumbai Police Commissioner, who was absent from the command centre, and the DG, who is in-charge of the state but not the city

Almost around the same time, there was another high-level meeting on at another place in the city. The then Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad Chief Hemant Karkare, DG Roy and the then state Home Minister R R Patil were discussing the sensitive Malegaon blast investigation. Around 9 pm, they called it a day. Karkare called up home to say he would be back in time for dinner, while Roy left to pick up his wife for the Trident wedding.

While they were on their way to the hotel, Roy got a call from a friend at Masala Kraft restaurant in the Taj Palace Hotel saying that there was firing outside. The DG immediately alerted DCP (Zone I) Vishwas Nagre Patil to reach the spot and take control as it could be gang warfare. The friend again called up, and this time the DG could hear the continuous burst of fire on the phone. Roy decided to give up the plan to go to the wedding and returned to the headquarters. Here all top state officials except that of the Mumbai Police were watching the action on TV in his room, along with Home Minister Patil.

Roy called up the Mumbai Police Commissioner's control room, only to find that Joint Commissioner (Crime) Rakesh Maria handling the operations and Police Commissioner Hasan Gafoor were not there. By now, reports of firing were pouring in from CST Terminus, Cama Hospital, Taj Palace, Nariman House and Trident Hotel. With Gafoor parked inside his car outside the Trident, the command and control of Mumbai Police response had collapsed, with few ready to take orders from Maria and Roy not in charge of the city.

The city and the country paid heavily for the division of authority between the Mumbai Police Commissioner and the DG on that day as the two for the past decade have had a separate police communication network, budget and operational control. Even the annual confidential report of the Mumbai Police Commissioner is written by State Additional Chief Secretary and not by the State DG.

The decision to withdraw AK-47 assault rifles from the police inspectors, taken by Roy as Mumbai Police Commissioner three years ago, also proved disastrous. All that the Mumbai Police had in response to the LeT's artillery was assault fire and grenades of World War II vintage, .303 Lee Enfield rifles, .38 bore revolvers, 9 mm pistols and lathis.

Only Additional Commissioner Ashok Kamte had got an AK-47 issued from police armoury that day. When he came face to face with the terrorists along with encounter specialist Vijay Salaskar and Karkare, he fired twice at Kasab but missed narrowly. Not wearing the state-of-the-art bullet-proof headgear he had got from Kosovo, he was shot dead along with his two colleagues. It was around midnight that Maria and Roy realised the situation had got out of control. Maharashtra Chief Secretary Johny Joseph was requested to seek commandos and the NSG for help.

Given the cost of the breakdown of coordination that day, the state Government is now mulling putting the Mumbai Police Commissioner under the direct control of the state DG. This was given in-principle clearance at the meeting in Nagpur last week, but will become operational only after the three-member inquiry committee has submitted its report.

So, on 26/11, barring constable Tukaram Omble, who took Kasab's five bullets in his chest to arrest him, and a handful of officers, the Mumbai Police was found woefully wanting. This set the stage for the Army, Naval Commandos (MARCOS) and the NSG to enter the theatre of operations.

ARMY, NAVY AND NSG

Marcos first refused to enter the hotels without state authorisation, then claimed to have killed two terrorists inside Taj within hours of starting operations. That information was totally false

The first to be called for commando help was Mumbai Sub-Area Commander Major General R K Hooda, who in turn informed the Maharashtra Government that he did not have any Army commandos with him. So what the public saw in the early hours were only Army footsoldiers on peripheral duties and not crack troops.

On November 26 midnight, Joseph called up Western Naval Commander J S Bedi for marine commandos as well as NSG Director J K Dutt in Delhi. It took another two hours for MARCOS to finally arrive. Although the Navy denies it, MARCOS refused to enter the Taj or Trident without written authorisation from the state Government. After the matter was sorted, two columns (seven each) of MARCOS entered the Taj and the Trident complexes. With the NSG team headed by a Brigadier still on its way, having had to arrange an IL-76 aircraft from Chandigarh to fly them and then Union Home Minister Shivraj Patil, the MARCOS made it officially known that they had killed two terrorists at the Taj complex between 4-4.30 am.

This information was totally false and it is still not clear whether the MARCOS engaged the enemy directly on that day. The NSG landed at 4.20 am on November 27 and took over the operation at 9 am as the MARCOS refused to function under the NSG Brigadier. In fact Army and Navy officers further complicated matters by going live on

TV channels while the fire-fight was on. Southern Army Commander Noble Thamburaj talked about a dozen terrorists being present in the Taj to the media even though he had no direct knowledge of the operations. General Hooda, the Sub-Area Commander, played to the gallery while the MARCOS projected itself as Rambo.

Neither did NSA Narayanan, who was out at a party that fateful day, nor the then chief minister took matters in their control. Shivraj Patil was in Mumbai only for a few hours during which he announced that terrorists had run away. A month after the Mumbai massacre, during which IB operational chief D K Sinha and R&AW Joint Secretary J S Khanna were in constant touch, a number of questions remain unanswered:

- Identity of the local contacts of the terrorists who helped the LeT identify the targets, including Nariman House? Past three year records of all the Taj and Trident Hotel employees have revealed nothing.
- Is there an al-Qaeda link to the Lashkar attack as for the first time Jews were slaughtered?
- Identity and location of the controller talking to the two Taj Palace terrorists? The controller virtually gave away his location when the terrorist asked him, “Wahan kitne baaje hain?” The VOIP call was traced to West Virginia and then lost.
- Were there 15 terrorists in total with five following up in another boat? The hunt is still on. The track back device in the used GPS was set for K T Bandar near Karachi.
- Who is the owner of ship Al Hussaini?