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India concedes government "lapses" in course of Mumbai attacks

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MUMBAI — India's top law enforcement official conceded Friday that there had been government "lapses" in the course of the terror attacks last week in Mumbai, amid a public uproar over security and intelligence failures in the deadly siege.

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"There have been lapses. I would be less than truthful if I said there had been no lapses," Home Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram said, adding that he was seeking to bolster the country's security.

The assault on India's financial capital left 171 dead and 239 wounded. Chidambaram, only days in the post after the previous minister was ousted after the attacks, made the acknowledgment as details surfaced that a Pakistani militant group had used an Indian operative as far back as 2007 to scout targets in Mumbai.

The surviving gunman, Muhammad Ajmal Kasab, 21, told interrogators that he had been sent by the banned Pakistani militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba and identified two of the plot's masterminds, according to two Indian government officials familiar with the inquiry.

Kasab told the police that one of them, Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, Lashkar's operations chief, had recruited him for the attack, and

that the assailants had called another senior leader, Yusuf Muzammil, on a satellite phone after hijacking an Indian vessel en route to Mumbai. The information sent investigators to another reputed Lashkar operative, Faheem Ahmed Ansari.

Ansari, an Indian citizen, was arrested in February in north India carrying hand-drawn sketches of hotels, the train terminal and other sites that were later attacked in Mumbai, Amitabh Yash, director of the Special Task Force of the Uttar Pradesh police, said Thursday.

During his interrogation, Ansari also named Muzammil as his handler in Pakistan, adding that he trained in a Lashkar camp in Muzaffarabad - the same area where Kasab said he was trained, a senior police officer involved in the investigation said.

Rehman Malik, the chief of the Interior Ministry in Pakistan, said he had no immediate information on Lakhvi or Muzammil.

According to U.S. officials, Lakhvi has directed Lashkar operations in Chechnya, Bosnia and Southeast Asia, training members to carry out suicide bombings and attack populated areas. In 2004, he allegedly sent operatives and funds to attack U.S. forces in Iraq.

Lashkar, outlawed by Pakistan in 2002, has been accused by the United States of being a terrorist group with ties to Al Qaeda. The group has derived some of its funds from organizations based in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and its leaders had made fund-raising trips to the Middle East in recent years, according to U.S. officials.

The Islamist charity Jamaat-ud-Dawa, accused by the United States of being the front group for Lashkar, on Thursday denied any connection to the attacks.

Ansari told the police about a planned Lashkar attack on Mumbai,

providing eight or nine specific locations to be targeted, Yash said, adding that Ansari had detailed sketches of the sites as well as escape routes.

Ansari said during interrogations that he had carried out reconnaissance in the autumn of 2007 of various Mumbai locations, including the U.S. Consulate, the stock exchange and other sites that were not attacked, Yash said. Ansari also confessed to arranging a safe house in Mumbai.

The authorities were working to determine whether Ansari, who is in Indian custody, helped the attackers acquire "such intricate knowledge of the sites," said Rakesh Maria, a senior Mumbai police official.

Yash said that Ansari's arrest did not derail Lashkar's plans for an attack. "When they found that their mole in Bombay had been caught," he said, "they carried out the operations in a different way."

Meanwhile, police officers said they were trying to get details from Kasab. "A terrorist of this sort is never cooperative. We have to extract information," said Deven Bharti, the head of the Mumbai crime branch. Indian police are known to use interrogation methods that would be regarded as torture in the West, including questioning suspects after they have been drugged with "truth serum."

Bharti provided no details on interrogation techniques, but said "truth serum" would probably be used. During questioning, details of Kasab's recruitment by Lashkar began to emerge, said police, describing him as a fourth-grade dropout from an impoverished village who was gravitating to a life of crime.

"Lashkar recruited him, preying on a combination of his religious

sentiments and his poverty," Maria said.

The Indian authorities have faced a torrent of criticism about missed warnings and botched intelligence. Linking an Indian to the plot also undermines India's assertion that Pakistani "elements" were solely responsible.

But Prime Minister Manmohan Singh maintained Friday that the attacks had their genesis in Pakistan. "The people of India feel a sense of hurt and anger as never before," Singh said in New Delhi. "We expect the world community to come to the same conclusion, that the territory of a neighboring country has been used for this crime."

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