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'We thought it was the underworld'

Presley Thomas, Hindustan Times
Mumbai, November 25, 2012

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Rakesh Maria, the 1981-batch IPS officer has been at the forefront of investigating most terror attacks in Mumbai, from the earliest one in 1993 when he was a deputy police commissioner.

He then tackled the 2003 twin blasts at Gateway of India and Zaveri Bazaar, and later as the Joint Commissioner of Police (Crime), he led the Mumbai Crime Branch to arrest 21 key Indian Mujahideen operatives in 2008.

Four years after he led investigations into the 26/11 attack, Maria, now additional director general of police (Anti-Terrorism Squad), talks to **Presley Thomas**, about lessons learned.

What were your reactions as the 26/11 attack unfolded?

We first thought it was the underworld and the drugs mafia when we heard about the firing at Leopold Café. But as it unfolded, we realized it was out of the ordinary. For the first time grenades were being hurled at police and police officials were being fired upon. Our finest officers had been killed. It was a

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complex situation from handling indiscriminate firing, hostage situations to bombs being diffused.

I was in the control room. Between 21.40 hours on November 26 to 02.00 hours on November 27, we received 1,365 terrorist related calls, each had to be treated with the same level of seriousness. Some calls were about terrorists at Hotel Marriott in Juhu, and at Four Seasons Hotel in Worli. And we had information about terrorists in Hotel Taj and Hotel Oberoi-Trident.

We had to ensure that men at police stations across Mumbai had to be mobilized and reinforcements sent to Taj, Oberoi, Cama Hospital, CST and other places. We also had to update our superiors, co-ordinate with the government, decisions had to be made to call for Army's intervention and mobilize the National Security Guards (NSG). At the same time we had intercepted the mobile phone conversations between the terrorists, and their handlers sitting across the border that gave us clarity that they were trained, equipped, and launched from across the border. Every minute was extremely critical.

What was the first piece of investigation?

It was crucial for us to get details about the attackers. The first questions when Mohammed Ajmal Amir Kasab was brought to me on November 27 morning were: How many had come to Mumbai and from where? How many terrorists were present at Hotel Taj, Hotel Oberoi and Chabad House? What kind of weapons they had, and the quantity of ammunition? What was their plan?

How was this different from the other blast cases you investigated?

Each case had its own importance and complexity. 1993 blasts were huge. But what was unique to 26/11 terrorist attack was that the entire conspiracy, including the planning, plotting and training of terrorists, was hatched abroad. Terrorists were also launched from Pakistan.

How difficult was this case in terms of international ramifications?

The terrorist strike had attracted eyeballs from across the globe. Police and security agencies from various countries were looking up to us to provide information. Pakistan was in a state of denial. The bogus identity cards carried by the terrorists had made the situation even more complex because foreign agencies were reluctant to believe the attack was launched from Pakistan. The onus on us was to disprove Pakistan's claims, and investigate the case that would stand before the scrutiny of the judiciary, international security agencies and experts.

Has the case changed the manner in which Mumbai police looks at security and terrorism?

Today, Mumbai police is a changed force and is trained. We have better equipments and also better equipped in terms of skills. The most important thing is that the force today is prepared for the absolute

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unbelievable.

Can you describe the amount of work, your men had put in with an anecdote.

I think all the 99 men who worked on this case showed absolute dedication and cannot single out one person. But one officer refused to answer his wife's call even after he knew his child was hospitalized. I had to force him to sort out the situation in his family. He visited his child and after a couple of hours was back in his office. It's an example of how the incident had sparked determination to nail the accused.

What can Mumbaiites do to help?

The war against terrorism cannot be fought by the police alone. We need citizens to be our eyes and ears; inform us if they spot a suspicious individual in their locality, or if someone suspicious has rented a flat in their neighbourhood. We need people to verify the identity of the persons when they rent their flat out. We take the flak when a terrorist attack happens, but we never let people know of the other nine times we prevented a terrorist attack. Have faith in us.

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