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Why are the Mumbai 26/11 investigations still in limbo?

August 11, 2011

The nation cannot depend on the US—and of course, Pakistan, to nab the terrorists. Security issues have to be dealt with directly by India through an efficient mechanism with an effective intelligence gathering system, swift combat response, hot pursuit and follow-up methods to effectively fight and eradicate the menace of terrorism

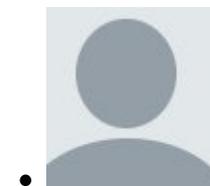
Karan Kharb

Pakistan's reluctance in prosecuting the sponsors of the 26/11 Mumbai attacks has angered us continually even though a few suspects including Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, the LeT (Lashkar-e-Toiba) operations commander were arrested and put through trial under pressure of mounting world opinion. However, the Indian government, media and people—all have been fuming at the Pakistan government's unyielding attitude on the issue. Nevertheless, while an atmosphere of peace, friendship and cooperation is always the best option for both the countries, aren't we asking for too much in expecting Pakistan to prosecute the people who, it secretly believes, deserve gallantry awards? How naïve of India to expect that her tormenter would come to her rescue! As if we should have asked then President Musharraf to hand over or prosecute Pakistani Army officers and men guilty of the Kargil 1999 intrusion. Agreed, these are the times of outsourcing businesses; but outsourcing matters of national security to Pakistan or the United States would be simply preposterous with disastrous outcomes. Security issues have to be dealt with directly by us

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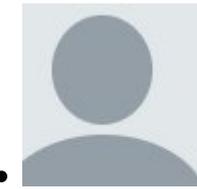
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- through an efficient mechanism with effective intelligence collection system, swift combat response, hot pursuit and follow up methods to effectively fight and defeat the menace of terrorism.
- What is more dangerous for the national security is a corruption aided tendency in our officialdom to pass the buck and cover up the mounting inefficiency in police, local administration and intelligence agencies at all levels. Neither our intelligence agencies nor the Mumbai police had any clue about David Headley—the Lashkar member and lead scout of 26/11, who continued visiting and holidaying in Delhi, Mumbai and rest of India for years before and after the Mumbai attack until he was arrested by the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) sleuths in the United States.
- And now we want him to be made over to us for 'further action'. The working of the police and intelligence agencies has been disappointing because blinded by rampant corruption they keep groping in the darkness without seeing much. Local suspects arrested from far-off places like Kolkata, Srinagar and Delhi have not led Mumbai police beyond primary level information like how the terrorists managed Indian SIM cards and little else. They did not examine their own surroundings and failed to penetrate the network in Mumbai that made 26/11 possible, no matter how well the ISI had trained and equipped them.
- An operation like 26/11 could not have been possible without a prearranged foolproof support base in Mumbai. Typical, military operations in border areas may be carried out without a 'support base *in situ*' if the objective is clearly identifiable and covered approaches are available. 'Covered approach' in military parlance means a concealed route chosen by the attacker to obscure his movement from enemy observation. But navigating through the hustle and bustle of Mumbai roads and carrying out a simultaneous raid at 10 different targets including Taj Hotel, Oberoi Trident Hotel, Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, Leopold Café, Nariman House Jewish Centre and Cama Hospital by terrorists coming ashore for the first time ever on an alien land humming with activity will be a foolish idea most unlikely to succeed unless intimately supported from the target end. A terrorist squad, howsoever well trained, leaving Karachi for Mumbai, not by air but by sea, would require pre-positioning of a reliable and well organised 'support base' with tentacles at sea, at the beach and in the city. It is understood that the overall coordination and monitoring controls would continue to function from Pakistan. And lo, we have not yet looked for those who constituted this support base for the terrorists and arranged for their reception, guidance, security/disguise, logistics, transport and, if possible, a get-away plan after the operation is over.
- Having planned and participated in operations in the elite counter terrorist force, the National Security Guard (NSG), I have some idea about the functioning of Special Forces like ISI (Pakistan), Mossad (Israel), Delta Force (US), GSG-9 (Germany), SAS (UK), et al. While it might sound highly unethical and illegal, it is not unusual for the state secret services to recruit and utilise terrorists, smugglers and criminals to carry out covert operations deep inside enemy territory. Even assassinations and kidnappings are part of the game. Sometimes, victims also are grouped, armed and trained to fight insurgents on behalf of the state like the 'Salwa Judum' in Chhattisgarh. Therefore, it is no big revelation that Ajmal Kasab and his buddies were trained under the ISI's supervision. The manner in which Mumbai 26/11 was executed made it abundantly clear that the operation was planned and executed under expert supervision of the Pakistan Army and the ISI. The tactics, weaponry, grenades, composite survival provisions, medicines, steroids

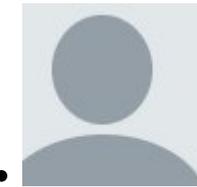
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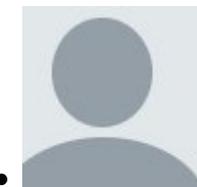
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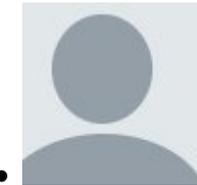
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- professors, because of the meagre salaries being offered and faulty recruitment processes
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- and communication system used by the terrorists pointed towards them unambiguously. Nevertheless, what has got overshadowed by the 'Headley confessions' is the need and urgency of home scrutiny that could have busted the 'in-city network' before it melted away.
- Some vital aspects that should have been explored on priority by the Mumbai police and intelligence agencies involved in investigations are:
1. An operation of the type of 26/11 has to be preceded by detailed reconnaissance and surveillance of the target area to assess its vulnerability vis-à-vis security status, suitable time of attack; communication, route, transport, navigational assistance and disguise required.
 2. Contingency plans to strike at other targets in the event of initial plans becoming too difficult to execute.
 3. Necessity to maintain total secrecy till the last moment.
 4. An unobtrusive but tactically useful location near or at the target itself for reconnaissance/surveillance personnel to acquaint themselves with the profile of the target and routine activities, state of security vigilance, vulnerability level etc. Ideally, such surveillance would be mounted several days ahead of the D-day. These advance elements may either join the assault team or withdraw just prior to the H-hour for other tasks.
 5. A suitable 'Safe House' for the advance elements and contingencies.
 6. Elements who are assigned such missions also need local contacts to merge with the local milieu without rousing suspicions.
 7. They might use more than one type of electronic network like satellite phones, mobile phones, radio, VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) etc.
 8. It may sometimes become necessary for such terror teams to kill their supporters whom they consider might get caught and blow up in the operation before it is launched, for example the killing of the Captain of the fishing trawler 'Kuber' and taxi drivers.
 9. Requirement of subsidiary support like planted media stories, flare up of communal violence, sympathetic political leaders diverting public attention, human rights activists blaming police and security forces, help line activists provoking help seekers etc., can tilt public mood adversely. We have live examples of this support extended by our own leaders like the Congress general secretary Digvijay Singh who blamed "the RSS inspired Hindu extremists for Hemant Karkare's death" and by AR Antulay, then a Union Minister who said "Hemant Karkare's death might be linked to his investigation of the 2006 Malegaon blasts believed to be handiwork of some Hindu extremists."

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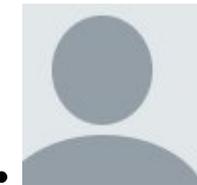
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It is also important for the investigating agencies to understand the mechanics of planning and execution of such operations. Unlike the earlier blasts and shooting incidents in Mumbai, the attack of 26/11 was qualitatively different. Local assistance and coordination must have been provided by helpful elements at sea, on the beach and in the city, perhaps closer to designated targets. The investigating agencies should have focused on the distinct stages and phases of the operation that would have helped narrow down their search on matters of direct relevance rather than groping all over the globe, looking for a needle in a haystack. An analysis of how the events unfolded suggests that most probably the operation went through the following stages:

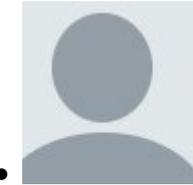
1. **Preliminary Stage:** Selection of volunteers, grouping, training, and other preparations.
2. **Phase I:** Movement requiring means of transport and navigation at sea from Karachi to Indian waters;
3. **Phase II:** Reception and marrying up with the advance elements, final briefing from a stand-off distance at sea; and landing on the beach;
4. **Phase III:** Quick dispersal of teams in pre-arranged vehicles for their designated targets;
5. Phase IV: Execution.

Normally, terrorists tasked for such operations are so deeply indoctrinated that they operate almost under a spell and will normally neither surrender nor get arrested alive. Kasab is a rare and lucky find for the Mumbai police.

But it is not only the Mumbai police; the entire system of our governance has been seriously damaged by corruption. It is because of corruption that failure in performance does not get punished and the inefficient and delinquent officers manoeuvre their way up the ladders without much hassle. Gratuitous returns have sickened our leaders, departments and forces that nothing seems to move us speedily in the direction required. We all are aware about the power base of the underworld in Mumbai, the finance capital of India. With Dawood's clout spread in Karachi, Dubai and Mumbai, it should have been possible to pick up more leads to reach more logical conclusions unless these leads led to someone too hot to touch.

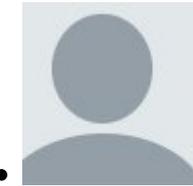
Last week I ran into a Pakistani journalist at a seminar in Delhi and asked him why his government was sheltering the LeT operatives like Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi and other criminals wanted by India even when his country is suffering most from terrorism. He retorted, "You are quick to blame Pakistan for not proceeding strictly and swiftly enough against those who are accused of their role in the Mumbai attack of 26/11. Whereas we have proceeded against the suspects of the Mumbai attack despite India not sharing the evidence collected in this regard, aren't you sheltering Afzal Guru despite a death sentence by your own Supreme Court even after his review petition has been rejected and the sentence again confirmed? I'm happy you have not yet blamed Pakistan for this." (Afzal Guru was sentenced to death in 2004 for the attack on the Indian Parliament, was to be hanged on 20 October 2006 but lives on for no apparent reason. His mercy appeal for presidential clemency has been under consideration since 2006!). I tried to

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 explain to him the legal rights of such convicts but he countered me yet again, "In another case, it was your cabinet minister who escorted Maulana Masood Azhar and his co-prisoners aboard a special flight and delivered them to freedom and safety in Kandahar and now you want Pakistan to arrest and send them to you. Isn't it funny?"

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 I had no answer. At the functional level of administration, we lack professionalism. At the national level, we do not know how to deal with serious situations at home or abroad. Result: no police or army officer knows about the

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 'government policy' in the event of a hijack or hostage situation because unlike Israel, India has no defined policy on it. Likewise, diplomatically, we are still in an ambivalent state while dealing with nations involved in the Arab Spring. Is India on the right path to assume her global role in the emerging world? Course correction in our governance was never needed more.

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 *(The writer is a military veteran who commanded an Infantry battalion with many successes in counter-terrorist operations. He was also actively involved in numerous high-risk operations as second in command of the elite 51 Special Action Group of the National Security Guard (NSG.) He conducts leadership training and is the author of two bestsellers on leadership development that have also been translated into foreign languages).*

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