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Securing the home front against terror

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Prime Minister Manmohan Singh with Chidambaram

Union Minister of Home Affairs P. Chidambaram is acutely aware that he has very little time to deliver with the general elections due in May 2009. In a way it is fortuitous because what India needs after the Mumbai attacks is action, and fast. In the saddle for just over a month, Chidambaram at a meeting of chief ministers on internal security on January 6 said his immediate priority was to raise the level of preparedness to meet the increasingly sophisticated terrorist threats. Equally important was to enhance the speed and decisiveness of the response to a terrorist threat or attack.

Both these measures are key to inspiring confidence of the country that has been severely punctured after the Mumbai attacks. But even as Chidambaram gets cracking on the stiff agenda he has set for himself and the Government, he needs to examine the functioning of his Ministry more closely.

The Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has to play a pivotal role if the war on terror has to be won. But in the past few years, the Ministry exemplifies what has gone wrong with the country's management of internal security. In the six months, preceding the Mumbai attacks, there were blasts in Delhi, Jaipur, Bangalore, Ahmedabad and Guwahati that killed 215 and injured 1,000. Typically after these attacks, there were "security review" meetings which saw the buck being passed from one authority to another and no responsibility being fixed. Routine alerts were sent to states to tighten their security with no follow up.

After Mumbai, it was evident that the MHA had to radically change its approach. It has its hands in just too

many issues. Apart from internal security and terrorism, its mandate is to tackle insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and the Northeastern states, Left wing extremism, border management, immigration, foreign funding, Centre-state relations, Union Territories, managing the Indian Police Service (IPS) and Central paramilitary forces, police modernisation and policy planning. Experts say, over the years the ministry has grown into a behemoth that is difficult to manage, has dragged its feet on key proposals like police modernisation, did nothing to sort out turf battles between intelligence agencies both at the level of the Centre and the states and has failed to come up with an effective anti-terror policy.

After 9/11, the George Bush administration decided that what it needed was a humongous Homeland Security Department that would, in the American President's view, "make America safer because our nation would have one department whose primary mission is to protect the American homeland." Bush decided that there would be only one department to secure US borders, transport sector, ports and critical infrastructure, apart from synthesising and analysing homeland security intelligence from multiple sources, training and equipping first responders and managing a federal emergency response.

Clearly, India can learn a lot from the American review of its homeland security. Given that bureaucracy tends to create more muddles in India, perhaps the solution lies in segregating the internal security aspect from other functions of the Home Ministry. The US Homeland Security Department does not deal with issues pertaining to police modernisation, procurement and other executive work. So it would probably help if there is a full-time Cabinet Minister to look after internal security, segregated from the MHA.

In the first flush of his tenure, Chidambaram has moved swiftly to get a National Investigative Agency set up to investigate terror cases across the country and also ensured greater co-ordination and sharing of information among intelligence agencies by reactivating the Multi-Agency Centre (MAC) and making it accountable. The focus now has to be firmly on prevention through enhanced intelligence coordination and sharing. He has also cut through the red tape and sanctioned long pending and muchneeded equipment for the paramilitary forces like bulletproof vests and rifles.

These would make a significant difference. But as important is pushing for fundamental structural and personnel changes in the Home Ministry. It could start by looking at the composition of those who head it. Of the eight special and additional secretaries in the Ministry, and 20 joint secretaries, only two are career police officers. Starting from secretary Madhukar Gupta, almost all in key positions are IAS officers with no experience of handling security issues. All officials handling key desks, including Kashmir, the Northeast, Naxals and Border Management are administrative service officers.

Learning from the US	
Mandate of the MHA	US Homeland Security
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> India's Ministry of Home Affairs has its finger in too many pies that make it highly unwieldy and ineffective against terror strikes. Among the MHA's major tasks are law and order, police modernisation, border management, centre-state relations, official languages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In 2002, US President George Bush created a single, unified Department of Homeland Security to protect America. The new department has only four divisions with a clear focus: border and transportation security, emergency preparedness and response, information analysis and

Modernisation has suffered because most officers handling the issue lack knowledge and field experience. The imbalance needs to be urgently addressed. The internal security division should be transformed into a body of experts capable of dealing with terrorism, insurgency and illegal infiltration.

There are other priority issues that the MHA needs to pursue. There is still has no system in place which can identify and weed out illegal immigrants. Starting in 2002, attempts were made to issue Multipurpose National Identity Cards (MNIC) to all bona fide citizens with the aim of enhancing national security, manage citizen identity and facilitate e-governance. With an estimated budget of Rs 5,000 crore then, the government has managed to issue only 12 lakh identity cards in the first phase of the pilot project. These should serve as the primary document to prove identity instead of a ration card, passport and others.

According to government sources, the project is stuck due to turf wars among the ministries of Information and Technology, Home and also the Election Commission. MNIC should be issued to all citizens within a fixed time frame. It should be the primary document to prove identity, instead of a ration card, passport, driving licence or PAN card.

The tardiness of the response of the police and security personnel were evident in the Mumbai attack. What is needed is urgent infusion of funds to beef up the existing police forces. The MHA had set aside Rs 1,300 crore for the modernisation of state police forces in 2008-09, an amount that has nearly doubled over the past five years. This money is meant to be spent on better mobility, modern weaponry, communication system, training, infrastructure facilities,

<p>policy apart from Jammu and Kashmir, Northeast insurgency and Maoist Extremism.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2008 alone, there were 64 terror attacks across India. 	<p>infrastructure protection and counter measures against WMDs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since its formation, the US faced no major terror strike.
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forensic science facilities, strengthening of intelligence branches, security equipment, construction of buildings of police stations, and construction of residential buildings for lower level police personnel.

The problem is that there is no accountability on part of the states or, for that matter, the Centre. There is no system of a follow-up or to check what the states are doing with the funds. The MHA should have an annual audit whereby senior officers personally visit the states to see and inspect how the states have used their modernisation funds. This would also introduce accountability at the level of various secretaries and joint secretaries of the Ministry.

A foolproof system of fixing responsibility needs be put in place. The response of agencies and officials after the Mumbai terror attacks was typical— passing the buck among various agencies starting from the IB and R&AW to Navy and the Coast Guard. Till date it is still not certain who goofed up where. By now, accountability should have been fixed and some heads rolled. Ideally, there should have been a timebound Commission of Inquiry— much like what the US did following 9/11—to probe what went wrong and why the attack could not be prevented. Also, what measures need to be taken to prevent such attacks.

Not sparing anybody, the commission should push for action against officials who were slack in performing their duty. This would cover all agencies including the IB, R&AW, Maharashtra Police, Navy and the Coast Guard. Even politicians should be called in, if need be. Unless tough action is taken, the MHA will lurch from crisis to crisis and the Indian state would suffer.

EXPERTS’ OPINION

Former top police officials and intelligence experts want an overhaul in the country’s security.

G.C. Saxena
Former R&AW chief

- Single counter-terrorism centre that deals with intelligence gathering, dissemination & coordination
- Well trained and equipped QRTs at vital installations

K. Subrahmanyam

Security expert

- A full time cabinet minister to look after internal security
- A dedicated cadre of officers, specialists in national security in MHA

Gopal Sharma

Former DGP J&K

- A national ID card for all Indian nationals within six months
- Bring in meritocracy, specialisation and enhance the Special Task Forces

ACTION PLAN

GET experts and career police officers, with experience in security and counterterrorism, to head crucial departments in the Home Ministry, including the top job of the Home Secretary

ACT on reports on police reforms and also implement multipurpose national identity cards

ENSURE co-ordination among intelligence agencies and send a clear message that a terror strike must be avoided at any cost or heads will roll

RED TAPE needs to be cut in making purchases for internal security **SACK** top officials for negligence leading to terror strikes

SEGREGATE internal security from the other functions of the Home Ministry

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