

Mumbai Rocked by Bombs; India a Terror Target

by Ramtanu Maitra

The two bomb blasts that struck Mumbai, India on Aug. 25—killing more than 50 people and injuring hundreds—have put the Indian authorities on notice: The rampaging terrorists, boosted by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, will not leave India alone. In Mumbai (formerly Bombay), following the mayhem, Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister L.K. Advani, pointed his finger to Pakistan as the mastermind behind the blasts. “I would say that our neighbor’s war of terrorism against us is directed not only in Jammu and Kashmir, as the worldwide impression has it. . . . The analysis and experience of the past shows that the target is not only Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, or Delhi alone. There is an attempt to destabilize the whole of India,” he said.

Mumbai Police Commissioner Ranjeet Singh Sharma told an Aug. 26 news conference, he is convinced that terrorist groups were responsible for the twin blasts in the city, and did not rule out the possibility that the banned Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET) were involved. A number of smaller bombings had occurred in Mumbai—according to one account, nine bombs had gone off over the last two months—and local authorities have arrested individuals, who are linked to these two terrorist outfits. “Several *jihadi* groups are targeting Mumbai, as it is the commercial capital of India, and we strongly suspect their [SIMI and LET] role behind these two blasts,” Sharma told the reporters.

A Look at the Two Groups

The two terrorist groups SIMI and LET, named by the Mumbai Police Commissioner, were both involved in earlier bombings in Mumbai. SIMI, which was banned by the Indian government under the controversial Prevention of Terrorism Act in 2002, is headquartered in the national capital, New Delhi, and has a following in north India and the state of Kerala. The group has reported linkages with the Kashmiri and pan-Islamic Pakistani organizations, but not directly with al-Qaeda as such. SIMI, which consists of young, fanatical students, who have declared “holy war” against India, was formed at Aligarh in the state of Uttar Pradesh on April 25, 1977. Mohammad Ahmadullah Siddiqi, Professor of Journalism and Public Relations at the Western Illinois University Macomb, was the outfit’s founding president. It origi-

nally emerged as an offshoot of the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind.

Intelligence reports suggest that SIMI secures generous financing from the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and also maintains close links with the International Islamic Federation of Students Organizations (IIFSO), in Kuwait. Indian intelligence officials point out their discovery that the Chicago-based Consultative Committee of Indian Muslims also supports SIMI morally and financially. Groups of SIMI sympathizers reportedly exist in several places in the Persian Gulf states. Jamayyatul Ansar, an organization of SIMI activists comprising expatriate Indian Muslims, reportedly operates in Saudi Arabia.

SIMI also has links with Jamaat-e-Islam units in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal, all neighbors of India. The outfit is alleged to have close links with the Hizbul Mujahideen and Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

The second terrorist group, is the notorious Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET). Translated as the “Army of the Pure,” LET was formed in 1990 in Kunar province of Afghanistan, as the militant wing of Markaz Ad-Dawa al-Irshad. Based in Muridke, near Lahore, Pakistan, LET is a powerful militant group operating in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), which has carried out several suicide bombings against Indian government targets in J&K. India also accuses LET of involvement in the Dec. 13, 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament. LET is anti-U.S. in outlook, but claims it does not espouse violence against Americans. In fact, LET, despite its prominence in Pakistan, has never indulged in anti-American terrorist acts, and has kept the focus of its terrorist acts on India, and on Jammu and Kashmir. It was actively promoted by the Pakistani ISI since 1996, after another outfit, Harkat-ul-Ansar, was declared a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States.

Lakshar’s first appearance in Jammu and Kashmir was recorded in 1993, when 12 Pakistani and Afghani mercenaries infiltrated across the Line of Control, which divides the Indian-controlled section of Kashmir from the Pakistan section, in tandem with the Islami Inquilabi Mahaz, a terrorist outfit then active in J&K’s Poonch district, report Indian intelligence officials.

Pakistan Denies Involvement

The Pakistani authorities have strongly condemned the Mumbai bombings as a “terrorist act.” Reacting to Indian Home Minister Advani’s pointed attack on Islamabad as the puppet-master behind the bombings, the Pakistani Foreign Office said Advani’s comments were “unserious.”

At this point, it seems that Indian authorities are accusing Pakistan because of the latter’s past record. In early 1993, Hindu fanatics, in the Hindu-majority state of Uttar Pradesh, pulled down the Babri Masjid mosque, which they claim was sited on the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram, and where they

planned to erect a Hindu temple. In March, a few months later, some 22 bombs had detonated in Mumbai. The attack on Mumbai's population claimed more than 250 lives and wounded as many as 750 others. Following an extensive interrogation of arrested individuals in Mumbai and those deported from the Gulf Emirates, the Indian authorities concluded existence of a clear link between the terrorists and the Pakistani ISI. Some of these terrorists who had escaped the Indian dragnet ended up in Pakistan. Islamabad, despite demands made by New Delhi to return them, has refused to acknowledge that the terrorists are living in Pakistan. Pakistani links were also established following the Dec. 13, 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament. At the time, New Delhi had moved its troops aggressively to attack Pakistan. Islamabad had successfully sought Washington's help to defuse the situation over a period of time.

Building the North-South Corridor

The Mumbai blasts follow a series of initiatives that India has undertaken lately, the most important of which is to integrate Afghanistan into the India-Iran-Russia North-South corridor trade route. Following Hamid Karzai's emergence as Afghanistan's President, backed by the United States, India has become very active in that country. The Indians have built schools for Afghan children, and hospitals for Afghan women, as Indian buses by the hundreds ply the streets of its capital, Kabul, and the Afghani national airline Ariana is being resurrected by India's gift of three Airbus passenger jets, as Central Asian scholar, Ahmed Rashid pointed out recently. One could make the point that India's recently exhibited interest is centered on its keeping the Taliban (read: Pakistan) out of Afghanistan. The newest strains in relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have helped the Indians further.

But New Delhi received a setback, when Islamabad announced that the Pakistani roads will be available to India only for importing Afghan goods, but would remain closed to cargo travelling the other way. Now Pakistan's refusal to allow India to have two-way trade with Afghanistan has made New Delhi sit up and think about integrating Afghanistan into the North-South Corridor.

On Jan. 4-5, India, Iran, and Afghanistan held a trilateral meeting in Tehran, to discuss alternative transit routes to Afghanistan. India, Iran, and Russia are involved in a North-South Corridor Agreement that provides a trade corridor for those three countries. The corridor connects Mumbai with St. Petersburg via Tehran and Moscow. In effect, it links the Indian Ocean with the Baltic Sea. Once the Indian commercial capital city Mumbai is linked by sea with the Iranian port city of Bandar Abbas, the North-South corridor will then rely on road and rail networks to connect Bandar Abbas with the Caspian Sea ports of Bandar Anzali and Bandar Amirabad, via Tehran. From here, cargo will be carried across the Cas-

pian Sea to the Russian port of Astrakhan. Then a long stretch of road and rail will run up to St. Petersburg, on the Baltic Sea, via Volgograd and Moscow.

The corridor is much more than just a link connecting Mumbai, Tehran, and Moscow. It provides Europe access to Asia and vice versa. The Russian network of roads and railroads are connected to Central and Western Europe via Eastern Europe. Iran has land links to Central Asia, and its ports offer warm-water ocean routes to India. "With India, Myanmar, and Thailand getting linked by road, the potential of the North-South Corridor is endless. The corridor could evolve towards boosting trade between Europe and Southeast Asia," wrote an official in the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) in a recent article.

The trilateral talks among India, Iran, and Afghanistan included Indian Minister of State for External Affairs Digvijay Singh, who had led the Indian delegation, while Iran was represented by its Road Transport Minister Ahmad Khorram, and Afghanistan by its Trade Minister Sayed Mustafa Kazemi. The talks focussed on how to make operational the Chabahar-Melak-Zaranj-Dilaram route from Iran to Afghanistan. Chabahar is a port on the Iranian coast and is crucial to opening this alternative route. Iran had planned to upgrade the Chabahar-Melak road and construct a bridge on the route to Zaranj. India, according to an Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesman, had already constructed a feasibility study on the 213 km Zaranj-Dilaram route, which it planned to construct. In late August, New Delhi announced its allocation of \$200 million the Zaranj-Dilaram road construction.

Since their Jan. 4-5 meeting, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami visited India to be the Guest of Honor on India's Republic Day on Jan. 26, 2003, and the Iranian External Affairs Minister Kamal Kharrazi twice trekked to New Delhi.

These developments, needless to say, have not been looked upon favorably in Islamabad.

Other Factors in Making India a Target

In addition to the developments around construction of the North-South Corridors—including Afghanistan and excluding Pakistan—New Delhi's recent announcement that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee will be visiting Islamabad in January 2004 has made the anti-India fanatics in Pakistan unhappy. Moreover, New Delhi was recently the venue of a surprise visit from Maulana Fazlur Rahman, a top religious and political leader in Pakistan. Maulana Fazlur, who is widely acknowledged as the "Father of the Taliban" movement in Afghanistan, made it clear, to the chagrin of the ISI and others, that the India-Pakistan Kashmir dispute should be settled by India and Pakistan bilaterally, without involving a "third party." Maulana Fazlur's statements in India were strongly criticized by Pakistan's anti-India fanatics, as well as those (within the Indian subcontinent and beyond) who

promote an independent nation of Kashmir.

There are others, however, who believe that India is being subjected to these terrorist attacks because of its “economic success.” In a lecture hosted by the Singapore think-tank, Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, the Indian External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha, who was in Singapore when the Mumbai bombs went off, said that Mumbai “was deliberately chosen because what these terrorists and their sponsors envy the most is India’s success in the economic field.”

Other observers similarly point out, that, like New York, Mumbai has remained a terrorist target since 1993. It is the financial and commercial capital, and the base of India’s off-shore oil industry. It is the Indian city that is most like any Western city, as the engine of national industrialization and modernization. It is the home of India’s largest stock market, and many multinationals have their corporate headquarters there.

As a result, many foreign investors tend to look at India through the prism of Mumbai. If internal security in Mumbai is sound, they see internal security in India as satisfactory. If it is bad in Mumbai, they tend to project Mumbai’s instability as a reflection of security problems in India. Hence destabilizing Mumbai would not only cause worry to India’s financial institutions, but also to foreign investors. This analysis, however, is no longer wholly accurate, with the emergence of Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai (formerly Madras), and Delhi itself, as significant engines of India’s growth.

Finally, the temple-mosque issue: The 1993 bombings occurred after the Babri Masjid was pulled down by fanatic Hindus. At the time, the terrorism was attributed to an irrational exhibition of anger by the Muslim radicals, with the sole objective of taking over the leadership of India’s Muslim community by showing its muscle. The Aug. 25 explosions this year, followed within hours after announcement by the government’s Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), of its discovery that the 16th-Century Babri Masjid—built by India’s Moghul—was built atop a huge 10th-Century structure. According to the ASI, which had been excavating the disputed site, the demolished and buried structure over which the mosque was built resembles a typical northern Indian temple. Assessing the implications of the report on the dug-out structure, major Muslim social and political organizations have quickly challenged ASI’s interpretation. It is a certainty that the Indian courts will have to deal with this in depth in the coming days.

At the same time, the bombings must be looked at as a provocation by a terrorist element operating internationally to provoke fanatic Hindus. Fresh Hindu-Muslim communal rioting, at this crucial juncture, may deeply undermine India’s important initiatives in the region, and throw up an obstacle to the Vajpayee Administration’s efforts to make India emerge as a major regional power, in cooperation with China and Russia.