

# London Heathrow Intercepted terrorist plot

11 August 2006

## Key Facts

- British security forces have disrupted a terrorist plot in which it is believed liquid explosives were to be detonated on transatlantic flights bound for the US.
- The plot was to involve individual cell members carrying onboard apparently innocuous items in hand luggage: potentially explosive liquids possibly in contact lens solution or fizzy drink bottles; detonators in camera flashes or hidden in electronic equipment. The disparate elements could then be used to assemble explosive devices on board the aircraft.
- The Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) have raised the UK terror alert level to 'critical', the highest state of alert, meaning that an attack is considered imminent.
- 24 arrests have been made in connection with the terrorist plot – the majority of these have taken place in London, with others in the Thames Valley area and Birmingham. The names of 19 suspects reportedly being held by police have been released: the Treasury is seeking to have the assets of these men frozen. It is understood that 5 men are still being sought.
- The principle suspects in the plot are described as being British born and of Pakistani origin. There is believed to be one white convert to Islam among them. Some of these men had previously been under investigation for involvement in extremist activity.
- Links to Pakistan have been uncovered and arrests made in that country.
- Business and residential addresses are being searched in the London Thames Valley and Birmingham areas – these will take some time to complete.
- The number, destination and timing of the intended explosions remain the subject of investigation. However, it is believed that between 6 and 10 planes may have been involved, perhaps with 3 aircraft targeted in each of 3 waves of attacks; destinations are understood to have included 5 major US cities, with 3 US airlines targeted: American Airlines, Continental and United.
- The US Department of Homeland Security has increased the threat level of flights originating in the UK to 'Red': it is the first time that it has done this.
- We are at the early stages of a criminal investigation that marks one phase of a major counter-terrorism operation. This investigation began in December last year and has involved an unprecedented level of surveillance operations: the meetings, movements, travel, spending and aspirations of a large group of people have been under scrutiny.

## Preliminary Analysis

The raised terror alert level is indicative of a concern that despite the significant disruption of the plot, the threat has not been entirely eliminated. There are concerns that a parallel cell may exist and operationally this is a distinct possibility. The use of devolved cells working independently of each other increases the chances of successful attacks coming to fruition in the event that the activities of one cell are disrupted; and minimises the risk of all operatives being detained should the activities of some be detected. Following attacks in London on 7 July, 2005, and 21 July

2005, evidence emerged linking the successful suicide bombers of the 7 July, with the less successful men involved in the incidents of 21 July. Two parallel cells appeared to have been operating, whether or not each was wholly aware of the precise activities of the other. The concerns of the security services that a parallel cell remains at large following arrests on Thursday night are sound, despite assertions that they have the situation 'under control.'

The plot marks the genesis of a new style of terrorist tactic: the assembly of explosive devices on board aircraft in flight. This is not en-

tirely unsurprising. It is the terrorist's method to devise novel and innovative means of attack that negate the effectiveness of measures taken to prevent these attacks. The style of these intercepted attacks should be seen in this context. The implications of this emergent *modus operandi* are far reaching: if an operative is involved in carrying innocent elements on board aircraft separately, for assembly and detonation mid-flight, how can he and his 'invisible bomb' be detected? If more than one operative is involved, the detection of the unmade bomb in its disparate constituent parts is further complicated. This concern must surely remain paramount in the minds of those seeking to prevent airborne terrorist attacks.

Recent AQ statements have reiterated an intent to target both the US and Britain. In this foiled terrorist plot we see an attempt to target both, implicit of how closely entwined the countries have become in the eyes of the terrorists who wish to attack them. It is increasingly clear that Britain faces the same level of threat as that faced by the US.

**The Bojinka Plot:** The disrupted plot is not without precedent: there are notable parallels with a 1995 plot to detonate bombs on 11 US bound airliners with stopovers in South East Asia. This plan was masterminded by Ramzi Yousef – the 1993 World Trade Centre bomber – and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed – chief operational planner of AQ until his arrest in 2002 – from Manila, Philippines. There are enough striking similarities between the two plots to prompt a far greater analysis of their potential connections than has yet been undertaken. Significantly, a contact lens solution bottle was used by Yousef to smuggle the undetectable explosive, nitroglycerine, onboard Philippine Airlines Flight 434 on December 11, 2004. This flight was Yousef's test bombing. He constructed a bomb with a fraction of the power of that that the final bombs were intended to have in the toilet of the aircraft, using elements carried on board separately. He then left the device inside the lifejacket under his seat before leaving the flight after the first leg of its journey. The timed device detonated in mid-air near Japan – a Japanese businessman was killed. If a contact lens fluid bottle was to have been used in the attacks intercepted Thursday, what else did they copy from the Bojinka Plot and what can be learnt from this? While terrorism remains an evolving science, historical analysis

frequently proves informative. Given the success of Yousef's test bomb, might it also be assumed that nitro-glycerine was the explosive intended to be used in this instance, perhaps even carried onboard in the same receptacle?

It is known that the tenacity of terrorists sees them revisiting unfinished plans: Yousef's unsuccessful attempt to bomb the World Trade Centre in New York in 1993 is often overlooked in today's post-9/11 world. Further, terrorists' use of liquid explosives is not new. The concept that such explosives would be used on board aircraft to circumvent current security measures in place to protect against more easily detectable solid explosives, should perhaps have informed the thinking of those strategies implementing measures to secure air travel before now.

Typically, questions of connections to al Qaeda have surfaced rapidly although there is not yet definitive evidence to support this. However, a terrorist operation of this magnitude – a well planned and well advanced plot with a significant number of operatives – appears to be indicative of a higher strategic oversight. Investigations revealed that the 7 July, 2005, London suicide bombers had links with *jihadi* elements in Pakistan. These men were not working in an operational vacuum without outside aid: videos released after the attacks are clear evidence of a support network that, at the very least, was able to disseminate the videos post-bombing – that of Shezad Tanweer was released a year later. Links with Pakistan are now emerging in relation to this latest terror plot. A number of people have been detained in the country in connection with the plan. It is perhaps worth noting that the former leader of banned Pakistani terrorist group, Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), Hafiz Mohammed Saeed, was put under house arrest in Lahore, Thursday. Despite having resigned almost five years ago from LeT to become the head of a charitable group, the Jamat-ud-Dawa, the two organisations are closely linked and LeT is strongly believed to have connections to al Qaeda. Similar to the London suicide bombers of last year, men currently detained in Britain are believed to have visited Pakistan. It is unknown whether they made contact with terrorist elements there, but should this prove to be the case, it is increasingly clear that a connection exists between British *jihadists* and support networks

based in Pakistan.

Inevitably, the future of airline security must now be reassessed. The threat of undetectable 'invisible' bombs, carried on board aircraft in disparate elements, possibly by a number of individuals with no apparent connection to one another, has now been exposed. Consequently, it is arguably not possible to return to any semblance of normality in aircraft travel. The only security measures that would guarantee the prevention of such attacks being carried out in future would involve the banning of all hand luggage – including bottles of water, liquid medicines and baby food – and the lengthy and thorough searching of all hold baggage. The security measures currently in place in the aftermath of the plot's disruption are surely not sustainable in the long-term.

Passenger profiling and behavioural analysis are concepts that have been experimented with in the US, however, such methods are not infallible and ultimately, their efficacy depends upon coherent and comprehensive supporting intelligence. With the future of air travel perhaps involving the application of security measures bordering on the prohibitive, it might appear that without even managing to execute this latest plot they have still achieved a victory of sorts.

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# INDIA, PAKISTAN, KASHMIR: A post 11 July 2006 analysis

10 August 2006

## Key Judgements:

- The deterioration in Indo-Pakistani relations following bomb attacks in Mumbai on 11 July marked a very public but temporary low point from which the situation has largely returned to previous levels of diplomatic engagement: Delhi clearly realises that engagement with Pakistan is more advantageous in promoting South Asian stability than hostile standoff
- The issue of Kashmir must be resolved
- Nuclear war between India and Pakistan remains unlikely, however India's patience with Pakistani militants is not infinite: future escalations of conventional conflict in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in Indian territory outside Kashmir cannot be ruled out
- Entrenched mistrust continues to inform political opinion in South Asia and drives predictable knee-jerk accusatory reactions in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in India
- Maharashtra – the heartland of Hindu nationalism – and Gujarat remain India's most tense states, both with large Muslim populations
- The movement of displaced militants from Pakistan to Bangladesh and Nepal should be monitored

You might be forgiven for forgetting that on 11 July, seven bombs exploded on busy commuter trains in Mumbai, killing nearly 200 people. Events in Lebanon have dominated the headlines. Since 12 July India's tragedy has been left largely ignored by the international community. Predictably, accusing eyes in India turned towards Pakistan and allegations of involvement, stifled at official levels in the immediate aftermath, became increasingly outspoken as the days passed. Talks scheduled as part of the fragile peace process between the nuclear-armed neighbours were postponed indefinitely. High-level Indian officials indicated the existence of overwhelming cumulative evidence of a Pakistani 'hand' in the attacks. With tension between South Asia's dominant neighbours running high, at any other time the international community's nerves would have been stretched.

The Pakistani Islamist Kashmiri rebel group, Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) emerged as the primary suspect. The group maintains a known capability to launch attacks on Indian soil outside Kashmir and a declared desire to witness the demise of a Hindu India. A lesser known organisation, Lashkar-e-Qahar – widely believed to be a front organisation for LeT – later claimed responsibility. The attacks inevitably presaged a marked deterioration in Indo-Pakistani relations, underpinned by entrenched mistrust and a persistent failure to make real progress in resolving the issue of Kashmir.

South Asian security has experienced a tremor of instability. However, while the immediate impact of the Mumbai attacks was ultimately short-term in both diplomatic and economic terms, the pressing strategic concerns highlighted by the attacks must not go unnoticed. They are critically important in the broader context of sub-continental stability.



The seven explosions themselves took place during Mumbai's evening rush hour, the timed devices detonating within minutes of each other. They had been hidden in bags placed on the overhead luggage racks of first class train carriages, carriages that are commonly occupied by the city's Hindus – generally more wealthy than their Muslim counterparts. The exact death toll remains unclear: reports are of fatalities between 180 and 190, with in excess of 700 injured. In the aftermath, Indian police carried out a number of raids across Maharashtra in which

the Muslim-dominated slums of Mumbai were a focal point. Hundreds of suspects were detained, but only four men formally arrested. One of these men is Abdul Karim Tunda, arrested in Kenya: Tunda is a suspected member of LeT. However, little information has been made public and the investigation continues to move slowly.

The LeT has denied responsibility. This is unsurprising: an open admission would have forced Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to take direct and public action against them in a display of commitment to fighting global terrorism. In contrast, moves to prove this commitment in the aftermath of the bombings involved the handing over of a number of Taliban suspects to Afghanistan, from where President Hamid Karzai's criticisms of Pakistani support for the Afghan insurgency have been outspoken in past months. President Musharraf has not handed over Syed Salahuddin, leader of Kashmiri rebel group Hizbul Mujahideen, or India's most wanted man, criminal gang leader, Dawood Ibrahim. Both men, believed to be resident in Pakistan, were requested by Delhi but their extradition remains a complex issue both legally and politically.

The difficulty of undertaking truly effective measures to dismantle Pakistan's terrorist groups is complicated by the fact that they have received covert funding and support from Islamabad in order to fight Indian rule in Kashmir. This has largely come through the ISI, Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence Agency. The LeT's ongoing involvement in reconstruction, rehabilitation and aid distribution in Kashmir following the earthquake on October 8, 2005 further discourages real moves by Islamabad to weaken the groups' activities there – despite reports indicating their humanitarian work is closely related to recruitment. Recently, Muslim clerics in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province have called for all female aid workers to be pulled out of earthquake affected areas by the end of the month. The disgruntled preachers in Manshera town, where a number of relief agencies are based, cite improper dressing, mixing with men and the consumption of alcohol – all officially banned in Pakistan – as reasons. LeT officials in the region support the allegations. The growing entrenchment of the group is clear.

## Mumbai

India's commercial hub, Mumbai is a city of dynamism and vibrant business activity. It commonly represents the face of a thriving, globalising India. Alongside Delhi, the country's political capital, Mumbai is a natural target for terrorism. The daily mass movement of commuters across the city – with a population in excess of twelve million – on overstressed transport networks ensures multiple opportunities for strikes against soft targets where high numbers of casualties are guaranteed. By some estimates, half of Mumbai's population travels each day from remote suburbs to central offices, banks, mills and factories. 40 percent of India's taxes are generated in Mumbai alone: some 5 percent of national GDP.

On 12 March, 1993, Mumbai's economic centre was targeted in the largest attack the city has yet seen. 257 were killed and over 700 wounded in a series of explosions at the stock exchange and throughout the city. Mumbai's potent and active criminal underworld was held responsible with Dawood Ibrahim suspected of masterminding the attacks. In August 2003, 52 were killed and 150 wounded when two almost simultaneous car bombs planted in taxis detonated – one in a busy jewellery market, the other at the Gateway of India, the city's main tourist attraction. Four men and a woman were charged in June 2004 under India's Prevention of Terrorism Act with conspiring to explode not only the car bombs, but an earlier bus bomb in July 2003. They are suspected of working for LeT, an allegation they deny. At the time of the attacks, religious tensions ran high, exacerbated by arguments over a disputed religious location at Ayodhya: a report had recently been released favouring Hindu claims to the site.

Importantly, Mumbai is also at the centre of Hindu nationalist sentiment in India, with the state of Maharashtra representing the stronghold of the Shiv Sena (SS). The opportunity to strike the heartland of this Hindu nationalist party, sometimes described as a quasi-fascist organisation with its long history of violent protest and extortion, is clearly attractive to Islamic extremists. Provoking a reaction here to exacerbate volatile religious tensions, undermining the moderate stance of a secular administration is an obviously conceivable aim of

an attack in Mumbai. Although operational only at a state level and without national representation, the SS is affiliated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Having ruled Maharashtra together, the SS-BJP coalition lost control in the 2004 state assembly election. However, despite suffering losses in Mumbai, the SS has gained ground in interior parts of the state.

### Kashmir

The Indian government's carefully cultivated moderate stance towards Pakistan suffered an inevitable loss of public support in the wake of the Mumbai attacks. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh faced pressure from Hindu nationalist opposition parties, frequently outspoken groups with their own violent elements. The hardening of Delhi's attitude towards pursuing a peace process with a government felt to be not simply unable but, critically, unwilling effectively to fight terrorism known to emanate from within its borders reflected this pressure. An initial reluctance openly to draw a firm link to Pakistan was replaced by assertions of overwhelming amounts of cumulative evidence supporting the association. Islamabad denied all accusations, but Delhi postponed peace talks without scheduling a date for their resumption, signalling a determination to take an unyielding approach towards Pakistan while emotions ran high following the attacks.

However, this attitude, initially a public necessity has, as expected, proved to be unsustainable in diplomatic corridors. For all his faults, President Musharraf remains a moderate when it comes to Kashmir: beneath the rhetoric, Delhi has maintained an awareness that continuing engagement with him remains the best option yet for resolving the issue.

Musharraf has floated a number of constructive suggestions for strategies to relieve the dispute. In comparison, despite Prime Minister Singh's temperate attitude towards Islamabad, Delhi has given very little ground and has failed to come up with any solution that Islamabad might begin to find palatable. The impasse rests on India's refusal to cede any territory or sovereignty within Kashmir: it wants the present Line of Control to become an international, permanent border. Pakistan does not. India's share of land represents not only the more wealthy part of the divided

state, but a part where Muslim Kashmiris now outnumber Hindus – a result of Hindu migration in the face of Islamist terror. The large majority of those separatists among them are peaceful; but any Indian efforts at diplomacy without real moves towards negotiating a just resolution of the Kashmir issue will not even appease them, let alone the violent *jihadists* involved. Indian Kashmir's demography continues to underpin Delhi's reluctance to internationalise the conflict: an internationalisation that could result in calls for a referendum in which the outcome may well not be to India's favour.

Despite President Musharraf's failure to rein in militants – either genuine or the desired outcome of dealing in peace with one hand while directly or indirectly facilitating terror with the other – neither Islamabad nor Delhi will benefit from his untimely demise. Numerous assassination attempts are testament to the determination of those who wish to remove him, yet it is difficult to know what might come after the president should one of these prove to be successful. The distinct possibility remains that the situation could be a lot worse than what currently prevails, however flawed that may be. Under President Musharraf, recognised as a moderate on both sides of the border, far more progress has been made with India than under any other Pakistani president; furthermore, recourse to nuclear confrontation with him in power is remote. In contrast, a post-Musharraf administration led by a dangerously ambitious coalition of mid- and low ranking military personnel, and a more potent, less restrained Islamist force, might not show the same self-control. However, even as Delhi recognises the need for a Musharraf led dialogue to continue, its commitment to the peace process sometimes remains difficult to judge. There have been suggestions that Delhi was unprepared for contact on 20 July, using the Mumbai bombings as a convenient pretext for delaying the talks.

While those looking for somewhere to lay the blame do so at Pakistan's door, where the president's real control over Islamist militants remains uncertain, it is unlikely that the '*jihad* factory next door' is wholly to blame. Islamist extremism also resides deep within India where a critical disconnect between Muslim Indians and their national homeland persists even in the younger generation. Local support for terrorist attacks wouldn't be hard to muster. The

Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) is suspected of operating with LeT in the past and the involvement of local elements with outside support is a distinct possibility in the Mumbai attacks. This reflects the ability of indigenous units to access a global network which provides the aid, operational linkages and technical expertise needed to allow them to become involved in launching attacks.

### A Waiting Game

India's response to the Mumbai attacks, slow in coming at an official level, was predictable; but notable was Delhi's adoption of a far more cautious tone than in the past. Prime Minister Singh remained careful not to speak of cross-border terrorist infiltration for three days after the attack, and in the immediate aftermath there were no troop deployments and no forward movements along the border. This is in stark contrast to the situation following attacks against the Indian parliament in 2001 – for which the LeT is held responsible – where all-out war between India and Pakistan loomed dangerously close.

However, while the world continues to focus its attention elsewhere, India will be looking for some clear evidence from Islamabad that President Musharraf is doing as much as he can to clamp down on the terrorist networks believed to have propagated the violence through whatever channels. Delhi's patience is not infinite. Neither is Prime Minister's Singh's ability to maintain a moderate attitude towards Pakistan in the wake of such painful events. Despite its reluctance to internationalise the Kashmir issue, India faces a terrorist threat similar to that in London, Madrid and elsewhere – and Delhi is considerably closer. On the other hand, President Musharraf is unable to continue to take the creative lead in solving the Kashmir dispute without seeing some positive moves from Delhi to match his commitment. Both sides are unyielding; both will need to find generosity and honesty in their diplomacy if real substance is to be expected from future peace talks.

It is undoubtedly the issue of Kashmir that underlies the current standoff. Islamist activity in Indian territory has intensified as the peace process has progressed. The day before the Mumbai bombings, a series of grenade attacks

was launched in the summer capital, Srinagar. Connections between these and Mumbai remain unproven, but London's *Financial Times* quoted intelligence sources that had suggested an association. The attacks are clearly disparate in terms of tactics and levels of sophistication, but speculation over linkages inevitably increases pressure on Prime Minister Singh not to give ground – literally and metaphorically – in Kashmiri peace negotiations until Pakistan does more to rein in militants.

Neither leader wishes to see a return to the border skirmishing that has defined the Indo-Pakistani relationship in the past – especially given the hard work poured into diplomacy over recent years. Encouragement this time can be drawn from the absence of an escalation in conventional conflict in Kashmir and aggressive troop mobilisations along the border following the Mumbai bombings. Prudence has prevailed and a return to previous levels of diplomatic engagement indicates Delhi's awareness that engagement with Islamabad remains the best prospect for promoting South Asian stability than hostile standoff.

However, both President Musharraf and Prime Minister Singh appear to be playing a waiting game. Neither can afford to stall indefinitely: Delhi must do more to improve the situation in Kashmir, itself a powerful strategy in undermining Kashmiri *jihadists*; and Islamabad must prove its determination to effectively confront the terrorist networks it harbours. The effectiveness of such measures may be discernable in the movement of militants to Nepal and Bangladesh, where Islamist extremism has become an increasing worry in the latter.

It may not be the case that the conflict averted this time will not materialise in future. Until genuine moves are made on both sides there will be little progress. The Mumbai bombings are a tragic reminder that once again reiterate the fact that the issue of Kashmir must be resolved.

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