



BANGLADESH, ASSAM & WEST BENGAL: THE NEW CROSSROADS FOR TERRORISM IN SOUTH ASIA?

Uday Deshwal

Research Associate, CAPS

The city of Burdwan in West Bengal, located approximately 150 kilometers from Kolkata, was the location of a blast that occurred inside the premises of a house on October 2nd, resulting in the death of two men, Shakil Ahmed and Swapan Mondal. Another man, Abdul Hakim (who was injured in the blast) along with two women, Rumi Bibi and Amina Bibi, were also present in the premises at the time of the blast and have subsequently been detained by the authorities¹. The two women upon probing have reportedly disclosed that they were all members of the terrorist outfit Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JuM-B/JMB), and were planning to carry out attacks across Bangladesh. The women's admissions and subsequent investigation have further revealed the disturbing existence of a much larger terror scheme of JMB operating out of India to attack various targets in Bangladesh and possibly even India.

A scheme that apparently had been in the works for months involving the manufacturing of IEDs to be sent back to Bangladesh and even Assam for carrying out acts of terror, as well as carrying out recruitment and fund-raising drives, with senior JMB operatives frequently visiting at least seven madrasas across three districts (Murshidabad, Malda and Nadia) near the Bangladesh border in West Bengal. The authorities allegedly found around 50 grenades, gelatin sticks, chemicals and 5 cellphones with 50 SIM cards at the house in Burdwan where the blast took place, with Intelligence sources claiming that at least 50 IEDs manufactured in JMB hideouts such as the Burdwan house may have already found their way into Bangladesh to be used for nefarious

purposesⁱⁱ. The presence of this purported new terror network operating from West Bengal and Assam has found further credence as authorities discovered another two-dozen abandoned IEDs on 17th October at a desolate location in the Malda districtⁱⁱⁱ. In the past few days, six other supposed JMB sleeper cell operatives have been arrested in Assam, along with the discovery of leaflets and other propaganda material in the area^{iv}.

JMB's terror threat took centre stage in 2005 when they carried out a series of almost 500 synchronised blasts in 63 out of 64 districts in Bangladesh, with an agenda to do away with democracy in the country and establish a rule under the strict guidance of the Sharia. The JMB has since been vehemently against the idea of democracy in Bangladesh and consequently been against any regional cooperation between Dhaka and New Delhi. While, the JMB has not yet carried out any direct acts of terror against India, the group has been known to provide arms and training in the past to the separatist elements operating in the Northeastern parts of India. In addition, the group has also had a long history of co-operating with Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)^v and allegedly even has ties with Al-Qaeda^{vi}.

Another recent and related revelation made by Assam's Chief Minister, Tarun Gogoi, is of vital importance in this context. On the day after Al Zawahiri's pronouncement of Al Qaeda's dedicated South Asia wing, Gogoi revealed how his government had intelligence on Al Qaeda's attempts at trying to set up a base in the state and how they had allegedly entered into a "tacit understanding" with the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)^{vii}. If validated and true, these signs certainly don't paint a very positive picture for India and the rest of the region. A resurgent JMB (spreading its reach across even the two Indian states) with existing Al Qaeda, LeT and local Northeastern separatist ties, and a potential Al Qaeda presence in the region with support from the ULFA, the entire region comprising of Bangladesh and parts of the surrounding Indian border states of Assam and West Bengal could emerge as the new safe havens for terrorist/insurgent groups in the Indian sub-continent.

The recurring rhetoric over the past decades has been the rising concern over Bangladesh turning into a safe haven for extremist elements looking to target India. However, given the recent events that have transpired in Assam and West Bengal, New Delhi along with the respective state governments need to have a comprehensive and honest re-look at the factors and reasons that

have led to the current situation inside the periphery of its own boundaries. While we claim to have established a closer relationship with Bangladesh on issues related to regional terrorism, the facts seem to be pointing otherwise with us lacking the necessary will at times to act on the related information received from our counterparts across the border. For instance, in a case from around four years ago, Bangladesh pushed for the extradition of an alleged terrorist, who had been reportedly operating out of one of the seven madrasas that have also been recently targeted for use by the JMB leadership. The state government at the time was reluctant to offer any help, a foreign ministry official had claimed in an unofficial report. On another occasion, the R&AW chief KC Verma's efforts to get the central government to act on Bangladesh's request for extradition of a supposed JMB operative failed as the then Home Minister P.Chidambaram was unable to coordinate effectively with the West Bengal government^{viii}.

A fresh wave of extremism in Bangladesh can dent the still developing pillars of a democratic structuring of the country, something which is bound to have direct and indirect repercussions on India and our efforts for regional safety. In that regard and in countering the overall menace of terrorism in South Asia, we need to consciously and seriously take on the role of a regional leader by effectively walking the talk by promoting an integrated regional approach to the issue and most importantly by focusing on developing the right infrastructure and other socio-economic tools to ensure a conducive and safe social environment for the youth and the various minorities in the region, as successfully countering the negative ideologies from penetrating the society is a more holistic solution in dealing with the issue of ridding the states in question (and the region as a whole) from the prevalent and gravely rising threat of parts of these states turning into terrorist hubs, and in general countering the use of our soil for promulgating terror in the region. Only a firm hand in dealing with the state governments on these issues, along with greater dialogue and bilateral involvement & trust with Bangladesh (both, directly over issues of border security & intelligence and indirectly, through supporting and ensuring the continued presence of the democratic regime) can dispel these imminent internal and regional security threats.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS))

ⁱ Choudhury, Ratnadip, "How The Burdwan Blast Singed Assam", *Tehelka Magazine (Volume 11 Issue 43)*, <http://www.tehelka.com/how-the-burdwan-blast-terror-trail-singed-assam/>

ⁱⁱ Datta, Saikat, "Larger terror design behind Burdwan blast?", *Hindustan Times*, October 14, 2014, http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/larger-terror-design-behind-burdwan-blast/article1-1275419.aspx?utm_content=buffer52d05&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

ⁱⁱⁱ IANS, "West Bengal: Two dozen crude bombs found in an orchard in Malda", *IBNLive*, October 17, 2014, <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/west-bengal-two-dozen-crude-bombs-found-in-an-orchard-in-malda/506780-3-231.html>

^{iv} Choudhury, n.1

^v Swami, Praveen, "JuM-B: An old link with bombmaker 'Tunda', a new terror threat to India", *Indian Express*, October 16, 2014, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/jum-b-an-old-link-with-bombmaker-tunda-a-new-terror-threat-to-india/1/>

^{vi} Choudhury, n.1

^{vii} Choudhury, n.1

^{viii} Datta, n.2

