Failure of intelligence and security reforms

By Bibhu Prasad Routray & Shanthile Mariet D’Souza for The Straits Times

In THE wake of last week’s Mumbai blasts, the Indian government has insisted that the lack of prior intelligence about the attacks does not amount to an intelligence failure.

To the experts and the common man, however, nothing but a gross intelligence failure could have resulted in the coordinated attacks on three bustling locations. Such a failure is rooted in the country’s lackadaisical attitude to security reforms, even after several terrorist strikes.

Mumbai has always been vulnerable to terrorist attacks. Zaveri Bazaar, the Opera House and Dadar – where bombs went off within a space of 15 minutes on July 13 – have been described in the media as crowded areas.

If congestion makes a place an attractive target, then almost the whole of Mumbai, a city of more than 20 million which attracts thousands of Indians from other states every day, is a terrorist’s paradise. The countless points where people gather in large numbers – business centres, bus and train stations, cafeterias, markets, religious places and entertainment spots – present a nightmare for the law enforcement agencies.

Since 1993, 31 explosions, including the three on July 13 which killed 21 people, have rocked the city. Prior to the latest attack, 316 people had died in Mumbai’s explosions. The November 2008 attacks alone claimed 166 lives.

Yet even if the intelligence agencies had managed to provide some warning before the most recent attacks, the Mumbai police might not have been able to do much to prevent them.

For a start, it simply does not have the numbers. Maharashtra – the state of which Mumbai is the capital – has a meagre 166 policemen for every 100,000 people. While the ratio in Mumbai – 300 policemen per 100,000 people – is higher than in the rest of Maharashtra, it is still nowhere near the 500-plus that the United Nations recommends.

Official data also indicates that the Mumbai police have a vacancy rate of 40 per cent at the lower level. This includes assistant police inspectors and police sub-inspectors – the most critical level in managing and preventing law-and-order situations such as acts of terrorism.

But there are problems even with the numbers that the police force does have.

Inquiries into the 2008 Mumbai attacks revealed an overwhelming sense of lethargy in the police department. Officers apparently did not even bother to read the intelligence reports sent to them.

Very little appears to have changed since then. Reports now indicate that the Mumbai police are sitting on a January proposal to install 5,000 closed-circuit television cameras in the city.

It should come as no surprise that terrorists would exploit such vulnerabilities and weaknesses time and again.

Home Minister P. Chidambaram has said that all groups hostile to India will be investigated for their possible involvement in the blasts. This is perhaps the safest thing to do as investigations into past terror attacks, initially believed to have been carried out by Islamic militants, unearthed the role of the Hindu extremists.

But the minister’s statement also acknowledged the fact that the authorities simply had no idea who the culprits were.

Since the 2008 attacks, India has pumped in a great deal of resources to improve its ability to tackle terrorism. Each year, the budgetary allocation for the Ministry of Home Affairs has grown and, in 2009, the National Investigative Agency was set up. For the financial year 2010-11, the agency’s budget was increased by a whopping sum of over 160 million rupees ($84.37 million) to reach 550 million rupees.

India’s anti-terrorist commandos, the National Security Guards, who previously operated out of a city near New Delhi, were given bases in other mega cities to enable them to respond to attacks faster.

The country is also setting up 20 counter-terrorism schools to train security forces familiar only with normal policing. India amended its anti-terrorism law, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, which has given it some teeth to deal with terror crimes.

These measures have boosted India’s capacity to investigate terrorist acts. But its ability to prevent those attacks in the first place remains suspect. The collection of intelligence leaves a lot to be desired. Even 30 months after the 2008 attacks, projects such as the National Intelligence Grid and the National Counter-Terrorism Centre remain unimplemented.

Bureaucratic hurdles and turf wars between various departments and ministries continue to hamper India’s efforts to revamp its counter-terror architecture. One hopes that the latest attacks will push the Indian government out of its lassitude to commit itself to the vital matter of security reforms.

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