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We need a strong counter-terrorism system in place, sharpened by repeated drills and exercises and with total civil society participation, to deal with this terrible threat. Only extensive consultation with all affected parties and the adoption of best practices in other countries will result in an effective anti-terror law, says BHASKAR BALAKRISHNAN.



It is essential that all the entities concerned are involved in the setting up of the counter-terrorism agency and the coastal command. — V. Ganesan

India experienced a major terrorist attack on November 26, on soft targets in Mumbai. The toll of 180 human lives is heavy, but the psychological impact has been far greater on India and its people, as also on those from abroad. There has been an intensity of public outrage and international solidarity not seen before, which has long-term implications.

While the attack was on, one missed leadership of the calibre of Rudi Giuliani, New York's dynamic mayor at the time of 9/11. Political leadership seemed remote, and sometimes callous, and this elicited a sharp response from the public. At the same time, the security forces and fire servicemen were deservedly praised for their courage and determination in facing the situation, despite many handicaps.

The Muslim community, in particular, must be lauded for their forthright and strong denunciation of the attack, and expressions of solidarity with India's core values. In the wake of this terrible episode, the Government and the people are responding with vigour and energy.

The major responses are the proposals to set up a National Investigation Agency (NIA) for intelligence-related counter-terrorism, a Coastal Command for stronger maritime security, and a specific anti-terrorism law. There are numerous problems and pitfalls on the road to all three, which can only be avoided by a far-sighted political leadership and the constructive and sincere co-operation of all entities involved, be it the State governments, or the security and intelligence agencies.

The people must monitor this process closely and not allow any slackening of effort or descent into petty turf wars. For too long, the country has suffered from violent insurgencies, and armed extremists of every shade and political persuasion, who see the gun as a short-cut to their political ends.

Terrorism has strong links with crimes such as smuggling, extortion, and human trafficking. Organised crime, which has burgeoned in India due to a cosy relationship with some elements of the political class and law enforcement agencies, provides a source of support and logistics for terrorists, and a

nexus develops between them.

It is time, therefore, to crack down on organised crime as well. It is a pity that Dawood remains a threat to India even if he is outside the country. Is there really no way to suppress his Indian operations and why have they grown so monstrously? What are the vested interests that prevent this?

Root causes of terror

Much has been said about the “root causes” of terrorism. Dr Vamik Volkan, an expert on the psychology of terrorism, has some interesting insights. His thesis is that persons whose lives are disrupted by social or political upheavals or conflicts have traumas inflicted upon their sense of personal identity, which is normally supported by several layers of membership, such as the family, clan, village or local community, social and religious groups, country, etc.

Disruptions affecting any of these can cause traumas and alienation from mainstream society and feelings of low self-esteem. Such persons then become targets for conversion to terror as part of a deliberate exploitation plan that implants a large-group identity into him while injecting selectively religious justification for killing so-called enemies.

It follows, therefore, that society must provide effective means for such “disrupted identity” persons to rejoin the mainstream society in an inclusive and constructive manner. India’s ethos of multicultural understanding provides a sound foundation for building strong social cohesion.

A further problem is that the longer terrorism persists, the more difficult it becomes to wean away terrorists, especially the young, to normal peaceful lives. This has been the experience in situations such as Lebanon and Angola, for example.

In our region, terrorism has various faces — some internal, some external. Externally inspired terrorism has come from all sides of India. Our neighbours have different circumstances which give rise to terrorist threats to us. The recent Mumbai episode should be seen as part of a series of attacks that will probably continue into the future, as terrorists develop their skills and equipment.

Dealing with the threat

We desperately need a strong counter-terrorism system in place, sharpened by repeated drills and exercises, with full civil society participation, in order to deal with these very real threats.

Conventional criminal justice systems were never designed to deal with terrorism or even organised crime. At most, they may be able to sentence the apprehended and convicted perpetrators, who are merely expendable foot-soldiers.

The battle against terror is more like a war against an enemy force, and we need to decapitate its generals and commanders, deprive it of resources and mobility, and destroy its communications, command and control.

This calls for covert operations across borders in case the host country is unable or unwilling to take strong measures. But for successful covert operations such as those carried out by Israel, highest quality intelligence, commitment, preparations and political support are needed.

How do we ensure high quality intelligence and analysis? There should be no misuse of intelligence capability by targeting political rivals. The target should be terrorist entities and their front organisations. A high degree of professionalism and co-operation, co-ordination, and information exchange amongst various agencies — civil, military, and technical, is called for.

Creating the NIA may not by itself solve the underlying problem of lack of co-operation and co-ordination among existing entities with expertise and capability.

It should be empowered to harness all the capabilities of the IB, RAW, military intelligence agencies, and State governments to deal with terrorism. In organisational reform creating new boxes or entities

does not work if the basic problems of attitude and commitment are not resolved.

The proposed Coastal Command is an opportunity for a thorough review of the security responsibility for the coasts zones, from 0 to 200 km, where different agencies now have responsibilities. The Coast Guard must be made stronger, and the crack-down on smuggling intensified even if it causes some pain to vested interests.

There has been much discussion of the fact that public order is a State subject under the 7th Schedule of our Constitution. In 1952, nobody foresaw the rise of terrorism. Be that as it may, nothing prevents the Central Government from signing agreements or MoUs with each State Government under which counter-terrorism could be dealt with by the Centre. To win the battle, it is essential for the Central and State governments to work together, putting aside narrow political considerations.

The proposed law on terrorism has been a source of considerable contention. The human rights aspects, the due process of law and the need for deterrent punishment of terrorists need to be reconciled. Much care and much consultation with all affected parties is needed while drafting a good anti-terrorism law, and the best practices in this regard followed by other countries should be examined.

All these challenges will be faced and overcome with the support of, and persistent pressure from, the people of India, awakened by the recent terrible experience.

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