



Terror Attack in Bangladesh

*Dr. Amit Ranjan**

On 1st July 2016 seven militants armed with crude bombs, one Chinese knockoff ¹ and swords, and raising a slogan '*Allah O Akbar*' stormed into a popular eatery Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka's diplomatic enclave. At Holey Artisan, which was crowded because of public holiday, the militants held about sixty hostages, including many foreign nationals. To meet such an unprecedented security situation commandos from Bangladesh Army, Navy, Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams, elite force Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and paramilitary Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) were roped in. They managed to clear the area by the wee hours of 2nd July. In Operation Thunderbolt, as it was known, two policemen and six militants were killed, and one militant was captured. Among hostages twenty were found dead including nine Italian, seven Japanese, three Bangladeshi and one Indian. According to Director of Military Operations Brigadier General Naeem Ashfaq Chaudhary "Most of those killed were found with their throats slit".² The Indian killed was a twenty one year student Tarishi Jain who was in Dhaka on a vacation. Eighteen hostages were rescued. Among the rescued was an Indian, Dr Satyapal, who works as a doctor at a Bangladesh hospital. According to a rescued hostage "They (gunmen) did not behave rough with the Bangladesh nationals," "Rather they provided night meals for all Bangladeshis." He added "The gunmen were doing a background check on religion by asking everyone to recite from the Quran. Those who could recite a verse or two were spared. The others were tortured."³

According to Bangladesh security officials, two local militant groups, Ansar-al-Islam and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), were behind the violence. Ansar pledges allegiance to Al-Qaeda, while JMB claims it represents Islamic State (IS).⁴ The Amaq News Agency of Middle-east based terrorist organisation IS reportedly claimed the attack and tweeted photos of the dead victims lying in pool of blood.⁵ “By now we have a clear idea of the organisational structure, command and control and methods of operations of Ansar-al-Islam,” Monirul Islam, chief of Bangladesh’s counter-terrorism police, told *Reuters* in a recent interview. “They follow the ideology of al Qaeda, their operational leaders are mostly educated men, (from a) middle class background. They declare their allegiance to al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and, through it, to Ayman al-Zawahri,” he said, referring to al Qaeda’s global leader.⁷

Yet one cannot conclude the role of IS and AQ in the mayhem. A group may be inspired, encouraged and can express their allegiance towards a foreign group, but by doing these it cannot be considered to be a franchise acting on behalf of the base group. The dastardly attack in Dhaka was carried out by the home grown militants, and any role of the IS or AQ in it is nothing more than a hogwash.⁸ The security officials who see the role of IS and AQ in it must realize that , as for now, allegations or blaming others for the attack may relieve them from their responsibility, but in long term this recalcitrant attitude can become a reason for a bigger damage in the country. Hence, it is better for them to accept the brute reality of their society and take concerted action to address the challenges of rising militancy in Bangladesh.

Background

This bloody incident may have taken place now but the conditions which led to it were brewing since last few years. The signs were there in form of individual targeting and killing of liberals and dissenters in various parts of the country. The first one to lose his life in recent years was Rajib Haider in 2013. He was killed for calling on people to join in protest at Shahbag to demand death penalty to the perpetrators of 1971 war. Then on 27 February 2015, Avijit Roy, an atheist blogger, was hacked to death in Dhaka. He was a Bangladesh born US citizen and the founder of a blog, *Mukto Mano*. According to reports,

Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), an Islamist extremist group based in Bangladesh, claimed the responsibility for the murder. On 30 March 2015, a blogger, Washiqur Rahman was stabbed to death for his progressive blogs. Niladri Chattopadhyay, who was a *Gonojagron Manch* (platform for popular uprising) activist, was another blogger who had been hacked to death in Dhaka in August 2015. *Ansar Al Islam* took responsibility for his murder.

In the second half of 2015, the radical groups have changed their targets. Their new targets were foreigners working or living in or visiting Bangladesh. The first victim was an Italian citizen Cesare Tavella, who was killed in October 2015 on a street in the diplomatic quarter of Dhaka. Although the responsibility of killing has been accepted by a group, which claimed to be a unit of IS in Bangladesh, the Bangladeshi intelligence agency has denied the presence of this outfit in their country.

After Tavella it was a Japanese national, Hoshi Kunio, who was gunned down in Rangpur on 3rd October 2015. The second killing had a deep impact on foreign diplomats and foreigners present in Bangladesh. All of them started reviewing the security of their staff; the United Nations (UN) offices issued a security related advisory for their staff members.⁹ On the killings of two foreign nationals, the Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said, "The style of the killing of the two foreign nationals is similar ... These were well planned. I want to remind you of a BNP leader's remarks before and after the [Italian national's] murder. If you compare the remarks, the matter will become clear." While ruling out the presence of IS in Bangladesh, Hasina blamed Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-Jamaat combination for the two killings. On the presence of IS in Bangladesh, she said, "I can say that no outfits like the IS can carry out their activities here. Our intelligence agencies are very much alert. We don't want to see any activities of such outfits in Bangladesh."¹⁰

Although the Prime Minister and many of her cabinet colleagues have refuted it, there are officials, who feel that the Al-Qaida and IS are trying to establish themselves in Bangladesh. The interrogation and investigation of individuals arrested in violent militant activities supports such claims. According to charges pressed against the four suspected

militants arrested in Dhaka's Jatrabari area on January 18, 2015, they had been involved in a conspiracy to topple the democratic government through subversive activities and establish a Khilafat state.¹¹ And for this, they had drawn inspiration from banned local outfit JMB and global terror body IS. In the charge sheet of the case, investigation officer AKM Kamrul Ahsan of Detective Branch said that the charges against the four – Sakhawatul Kabir, Nazrul Islam, Anwar Hossain alias Baten and Rabiul Islam – were primarily proved. All the arrested were actually involved with JMB and Kabir was a regional coordinator of the militant group. He received militant training in Pakistan and on return, he took over as the coordinator of IS' Bangladesh chapter.¹² However, after the recent killing of two foreigners in attacks reportedly claimed by the IS, the government ruled out any organisational presence of the global jihadi outfit in Bangladesh. According to the charge sheet, Kabir was an IS representative in Bangladesh, Nazrul a militant financier and Anwar a convict in an explosive case.¹³

Differences between the government and the security agencies over the issue of presence of IS and AQ in Bangladesh creates confusion and gives space to many conspiracy theories. There is a need to minimise such differences and develop at least a working consensus over the issue.

Immediate Reasons

These de-linked reasons may have acted as a catalyst for the attack:

- a) Bangladesh has joined the Saudi Arabia led coalition of 34 countries called Islamic Military Alliance to fight against the terrorism. The decision was taken during Sheikh Hasina's visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2016. This has triggered a debate in the country. The government is also planning to send its army to join the coalition against the IS in the region. If it sends its troops, it will be the first time that the country's Army would participate in such operation, besides the United Nations military operations. This decision of the government may have angered the militants who purportedly claim themselves as a representative of the IS or AQ in Bangladesh, and provided them a reason for carrying out such attack.

- b) In May 2016, in the wake of recent spate of targeted killings, including that of Superintendent of Police (SP) Babul Akter's wife, the police department began a weeklong clampdown on militants across the country. The decision came from a meeting of top police officials with Inspector General of Police AKM Shahidul Hoque in the chair at the police headquarters in the capital. The field-level officers have been directed to know the present whereabouts of all suspected militants in their areas. A list was prepared and many have been arrested, and a few were even shot dead in encounters.
- c) There was a speculation in Bangladeshi media about the combined effort by India and the USA to tackle militancy in Bangladesh. It was based on the visit of the Indian Foreign Secretary to Bangladesh, just after the US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Nisha Desai Biswal's visit to Dhaka on May 4-5.¹⁴ In Dhaka, she had an exclusive meeting with the Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Harsh Vardhan Shringla on May 4. The two agreed that India and the US did not want instability in Bangladesh.¹⁵ Although the Indian Foreign Secretary denied the speculation and called his visit a 'normal' one; yet such speculation and rumours do play significant role in building some sort of opinion, especially when a group has to incite its followers against the others.
- d) Bangladeshi expatriates have been found guilty in militant activities. Recently, a Singapore court convicted four Bangladeshi workers, detained in Singapore under the Internal Security Act (ISA), for financing terrorism. The four along with two others were charged earlier under the country's terrorism (Suppression of Financing) Act (TSOFA) with providing or collecting money to fund terrorist acts in Bangladesh. The six were among eight men arrested between late March and early May 2016. Working in the marine and construction industries, they called themselves the Islamic State in Bangladesh (ISB). They were planning attacks in Bangladesh in the hope of toppling the government. These sorts of cells are active in other parts of the world too. Support from such groups may have encouraged the militants to carry out the dastardly attack on 1 July 2016.

- e) Finally, the execution of the perpetrators of the 1971 war crimes in Bangladesh has divided the society. It has deeply divided the society and has created a situation where one group does not hesitate to use violence against the other. In past all execution had been followed by violent protests. The last one to get executed was Mir Quasem Ali, media tycoon of Jamaat.

Implications for India

As India has a contiguous border with Bangladesh, the growing militancy in Bangladesh is a cause for concern to it. In past the militants had crossed into Indian side of the border after carrying out attacks in Bangladesh. In 2010 and 2011, several members of JMB crossed over to India. They took great effort to mix with the local populace, to fulfil their interests. They set up hubs to provide training to prospective militants in manufacturing explosives and to establish links with international terror outfits. Facts uncovered by Intelligence Bureau (IB) and National Investigation Agency (NIA) shows that the JMB had begun operations in 2010 at Beldanga and Lalgola with around 10 to 25 men. Within four years, the module successfully recruited 180 men spread across seven districts of central and north Bengal, Howrah and Kolkata, from where it drew logistical support to carry out their operations in India and Bangladesh.¹⁶ In 2014 the group hatched a plot to kill the Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hassina, but their plot was foiled by the police and NIA. Shahnur Alom alias “Doctor Ilias”, a top JMB operative after his arrest by the Assam police confirmed that several top leaders from JMB had visited at least one madrasa in the state and conducted motivational training there.¹⁷

The states bordering Bangladesh have witnessed communal riots. The crossing over of the indoctrinated individuals may increase communal tensions.

Many Bangladeshi groups have had symbiotic relationship with the Indian Insurgent Groups (IIGs). Some of those IIGs have been neutralised due to many reasons. But any encouragement or inspirations from the militant groups in Bangladesh may lead a few of them to revive again.

To overcome all these, the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) has increased patrolling to check any possible infiltration from Bangladesh into India.

Conclusion

The groups in Bangladesh may or may not be linked to foreign group(s) but they certainly appear to be inspired by their ideology, and are following their tactics.

The attack on 1 July is first such incident in Bangladesh but it may be a start to this form of violence. While Bangladesh police and intelligence agencies are busy in tackling this and other related issues there is also a need to address socio-political grievances of a historically alienated group. The Bangladeshi society is divided into various units. Most of the recruits and leaders of the militant organizations are from the Urdu speaking ethnic group who still feels that they are being discriminated by the Bangladeshi state.

The government of Bangladesh has a major role to play in de-radicalisation of the society which can be done through replacing religious literature, signs and symbols at secular spaces. This is a difficult step to follow by any government but there are not too many options. In past steps in this direction has been taken by Sheikh Hasina led Awami League government. In 2010 the Sheikh Hasina government had ordered nearly 24,000 libraries attached to the mosques to remove books written by Syed Abul Ala Maududi, who was the founder of Jamat-i-Islami in pre-partitioned India and died in 1979. The reason given to it was that his writings were against the peaceful ideology of Islam.¹⁸

*Dr. Amit Ranjan is Research Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs, Sapru House, New Delhi.

Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes:

¹ It is also called as Romanian AK-22 which is used to train the military recruits before handing them AK-47.

² 'Roy, Shubhajit (2016, 3 July) ' Indian among 20 killed in Dhaka's night of terror' *The Indian Express*

³ <http://www.thedailystar.net/city/those-who-cited-quran-verse-were-spared-1249228>

⁴ <http://www.thedailystar.net/online/security-forces-begin-offensive-end-hostage-crisis-1249219>

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ <http://thewire.in/47253/home-grown-militants-behind-recent-spate-of-attacks-say-bangladesh-police/>

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ A journalist friend based in West Asia and covers the news for Al-Jazeera told me that about 99 percent of the cadres from the IS has no idea that there is a world beyond Europe, America and Middle East.

⁹ "Japan Outraged at Killing of Its Citizen," *The Daily Star*, 6 October 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/japan-outraged-hoshi-killing-152593> on 17 October 2015.

¹⁰ "PM Smells Link of BNP-Jamaat," *The Daily Star*, 5 October 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/pm-smells-link-bnp-jamaat-152074> on 15 October 2015.

¹¹ "Militants Plotted to Destabilise Country," *Daily Star*, 13 October 2015 Retrieved from <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/militants-plotted-destabilise-country-156151> on 13 October 2015.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ "US, India to work together to help Dhaka to fight terror" (2016, 10 May) *The Daily Star*, Retrieved from <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/us-india-work-together-help-dhaka-fight-terror-1221427>.

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ Dwaipayan Ghosh ' Boundary of Terror' *The Times of India* , 31 October 2014.

¹⁷ 'Burdwan blast: JMB tried to induct boys from Assam madrasa to create modules' *Indian Express* 7 December 2014.

¹⁸ "Bangladesh Bans Books Written by Radical Islamic Author," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsworld-south-asia-10661454> (Accessed on 24 December 2014).