

Fears of air-borne terrorists strikes in India, UK

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By B.Raman

(January 25, Chennai, Sri Lanka Guardian) The recent reports regarding the interest of the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET) and the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI) in an air-borne terrorist attack on Indian and British targets have to be taken seriously in the light of the capability exhibited by

the LET on 26/11 of 2008 for a sea-borne terrorist attack in Mumbai and the recurrent capabilities of Al Qaeda and pro-Al Qaeda elements for air-borne terrorist strikes.

The meticulous manner in which the LET operatives in Pakistan collected operational intelligence from India through David Coleman Headley of the Chicago cell of the LET and planned and executed the operation spoke of its operational capability, which is almost on par with that of Al Qaeda. For months before 26/11, there were periodic reports of the LET's plans for a sea-borne attack on Mumbai, but these reports were not taken seriously and a strategy worked out to pre-empt the LET attack and to neutralize it without much damage if preventive measures failed. We should not commit a similar omission in respect of the current reports about the plans of the LET and the HUJI for an air-

mounted action.

The Palestinian and the Khalistani terrorist organizations and Al Qaeda had always shown a fascination for air-mounted strikes because of their publicity value and their ability to demoralize the civilian population and to discredit the State's security machinery. One could mention as examples the hijackings by the Palestinians and the Khalistanis, the blowing up of the Kanishka aircraft of the Air India by the Babbar Khalsa in 1985 and of a Pan Am aircraft in 1988 by the Abu Nidal organization with Libyan support, the 9/11 terrorist strikes by Al Qaeda in the US Homeland and its subsequent attempts to blow up two flights to the US through a shoe bomber shortly after 9/11 and by a Nigerian student on December 25,2009. There were two thwarted or failed attempts (Operation Bojinka) by Al Qaeda or pro-Al Qaeda

elements to orchestrate the simultaneous blowing-ups of a number of aircraft---- once through Ramzi Yousef, then based in the Philippines, in the 1990s, and a second time through some members of the Pakistani diaspora in the UK in 2006.

Apart from nine air attacks by the Khalistani terrorists in the 1980s---- seven hijackings, the blowing up of the Kanishka aircraft and the attempt to blow up another Air India plane at the Narita airport of Tokyo on the same day in 1985, India had also faced a hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane from Kathmandu by the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HUM) in 1999. The HUM managed to take the hijacked aircraft to Kandahar and forced the Government of India to accept its demands for the release of some terrorists in custody in Jammu &

Kashmir.

Faced with difficulties in mounting an air-borne terrorist strike against El Air, the Israeli airline, because of their tight physical security, the Palestinian terrorists focused on attacking the ground capabilities of the El Air. In the 1980s, they mounted a spectacular commando style attack in the Rome airport.

The tightening of physical security all over the world during the last 20 years has not made the terrorists give up their attempts to stage air-mounted attacks. Examples of their success in circumventing tightened physical security are the 9/11 strikes in the US homeland and the two attempts to blow up US-bound planes from Europe. These two attempts illustrated the terrorists' capability to get into planes with concealed explosive devices despite physical security. The

9/11 strikes in the US marked the beginning of air-borne suicide attacks.

The recent reports regarding the LET's plans for an air-mounted strike speak of the possibility of another hijacking similar to the one organized by the HUM in 1999 and its attempts to procure paragliders reminiscent of the LTTE's initial attempts to procure microlite aircraft and its subsequent procurement of small aircraft capable of ground strikes. Ground strikes from the air with light planes or gliders could help in circumventing access control and targeting critical infrastructure such as oil refineries, off-shore oil/gas platforms, nuclear establishments etc. Paragliders could also be used for infiltration of trained terrorists.

According to the "Sunday Times" of the UK as quoted by "The Hindu" of January 25,2010, the Indian

intelligence agencies are reported to have alerted MI-5, the British security service, about the suspected plans of Pakistan-based pro-Al Qaeda elements to hijack an Indian aircraft originating from Delhi or Mumbai and crash it into a British city. The recent upgradation of threat level in the UK from “substantial” to “severe” but one below “imminent” has been attributed to this Indian warning. There is a possibility that the terrorist plans might be related to the January 28 London conference on Afghanistan. According to the “Sunday Times”, the Indian intelligence came to know of this plot during the interrogation of Amjad Khwaja of the HUJI, who was arrested recently in India.

The “Sunday Times” reported: “ It (the Indian warning) did not state that Britain was a specific target, but police security sources said it had raised fears in London that a British

city might be attacked.”

The HUJI of Pakistan, which has an active branch in Bangladesh, has close links with the so-called 313 Brigade of Ilyas Kashmiri, who used to operate in Kashmir as the head of the 313 Brigade and now operates from North Waziristan where he has close links with Al Qaeda. Since shifting from Kashmir to North Waziristan, he has embraced the global jihadi agenda of Al Qaeda in place of his previous Kashmir-centric agenda and has been talking of the need for a major terrorist strike in the West.

The interrogation of Headley by the FBI brought out his role in trying to use Headley and others in Europe for a spectacular attack on the Danish paper, which published cartoons of Prophet Mohammad in 2005. The Copenhagen plot was thwarted by the arrest of Headley by the FBI on

October 3,2009.

Against the backdrop of these reports, what Khwaja reportedly told the Indian intelligence about the HUJI's plans for a 9/11 style terrorist strike using an Indian aircraft hijacked by Pakistani terrorists has to be taken seriously and aviation security on the ground as well as in the air has to be stepped up. The oft-exhibited capability of Al Qaeda and pro-Al Qaeda elements to identify gaps in aviation security and exploit them show that the security measures taken after 9/11 are not adequate and need a continuous review.
