

Terror in India



TERROR has stalked Mumbai, India's commercial capital, all too many times before. In 1993 more than 250 people died in a series of bomb attacks, seen as reprisals for the demolition by Hindu fanatics of the mosque at Ayodhya. In 2003, more than 50 people were killed by two car bombs, including one just outside the Taj Mahal hotel, next to the monumental tourist attraction, the "Gateway of India". And in 2006 over 180 people were killed in seven separate explosions at railway stations and on commuter trains. But the latest atrocity—or rather coordinated series of atrocities is something new to the city. It has alarming implications not just for India, but for the entire international fight against terrorism.

It differs from most previous attacks in two important ways: in the sophistication of the operation's planning and the terrorist manpower that must have been involved; and in selecting foreigners as targets: hostage-takers seem to have sought out American, British and Israeli victims. As *The Economist* went to press, the crisis in Mumbai was still unfolding. Hostages were still held, fires still smouldering at the Taj Mahal hotel and occasional gunfire and explosions still to be heard. It was uncertain who was responsible, though a previously unknown group calling itself the Deccan Mujahideen had contacted television stations to claim credit.

Whether or not such a group really exists, suspicion will inevitably fall on Islamist extremists. Moreover, the tactic—familiar from New York's twin towers to the London Underground—of simultaneous assaults on "soft" targets, designed to kill large numbers of civilians, suggests an al-Qaeda involvement, or at least that the group has provided an inspiration. This is deeply worrying for India, which until recently thought itself immune from that particular scourge. Introducing Manmohan Singh, India's prime minister, to Laura Bush a few years ago, George Bush reportedly noted that India was a country of 150m Muslims and not a single al-Qaeda member.

Home-grown poison

In the past, terrorist attacks in India were routinely blamed on foreigners. This usually meant Pakistan, either as part of deliberate government policy or as the work of rogue elements of the state apparatus, or occasionally Bangladesh, also suspected at times of tolerating terrorist training camps on its soil. But in recent months a series of attacks in Delhi, Jaipur, Bengaluru (Bangalore) and Ahmedabad have been claimed by the "Indian Mujahideen". Indeed, this group, which the government since claims to have dismantled, had explicitly threatened to carry out "deadly attacks" in Mumbai.

India's Muslim population does indeed look like fertile ground for those sowing hatred. Although there is a general impression that the two-decade-long insurgency in Indian-administered Kashmir—the country's only Muslim-majority state—is in remission, it still festers. Last year the conflict killed more than 800 people. This year more than 30 unarmed demonstrators were killed in mass protests against Indian rule. Tension there is again high as

a state election, which separatist leaders want boycotted, is under way. Elsewhere in India, the Muslim minority is economically disadvantaged. A report the government commissioned in 2006 found Muslims across the country faring, on average, worse than the Hindu majority in education, jobs and income. And Muslims have occasionally been subject to hideous communal slaughter. More than 2,000 died in a pogrom in the state of Gujarat in 2002, for which the perpetrators have never been brought to justice.

That pogrom followed allegations that a Muslim mob had been responsible for the deaths of Hindu activists. This highlights one of the dangers facing India now: of a rise in communal tension and tit-for-tat violence. A general election is due by next May, which adds to the risks. One of India's two biggest parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party, now in opposition, champions the rights of India's Hindus. Accusing the Congress-led government of being "soft on terrorism" is a campaign tactic it has often used. In this it may now be constrained by the recent arrest of alleged Hindu bombers, seeking to avenge the attacks by the Indian Mujahideen. But the emergence of that new phenomenon—Hindu terrorism—is scarcely a comfort.

The usual suspects

A second danger is that if Indian suspicions again point to a Pakistani involvement, the slow thawing of relations between the two hostile neighbours will revert to the deep freeze. In fact Pakistan's new president, Asif Zardari, has been going out of his way—and courting controversy at home—to placate India. He has annoyed jihadists by describing Kashmiri militants as "terrorists" (as India has long wanted them to be known). And he has said Pakistan would never be first to use its nuclear weapons. This week it has also emerged that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, the spook network habitually blamed by India for involvement in cross-border attacks, has been revamped. Its "political" arm (previously, in theory, non-existent) is said to have been disbanded. So any official Pakistani involvement would suggest that Mr Zardari and his government are not in control.

A third danger is one that faces not just India, but the world as a whole: that the attacks in Mumbai mark a serious setback or even turning-point in the battle against al-Qaeda and its clones. The group has been losing ground in some of the Muslim countries where it has been fighting: in Indonesia, for example, where since the Bali bombings in 2002 the extremists have been in retreat; or in Iraq, where the Sunni "awakening" illuminated the resentment many Iraqis felt for the terrorists. Killing fellow Muslims has been the group's biggest mistake. But countries where Muslims are in a minority may offer terrorists a better target. Many Muslims in such places feel marginalised, pushed to the fringes of society. Attacks there can provoke a backlash, feeding a sense of Muslim beleaguerment for al-Qaeda to exploit. This tactic has already worked in places such as Britain. If it succeeds in India, which has the biggest Muslim minority in the world, the implications for the global struggle against terrorism could be catastrophic.

Terror in India. **The Economist**, New York. <Disponível em: http://www.economist.com/opinion/displaystory.cfm?story_id=12701072>. Acesso em: 8 dez. 2008.