

Bomb blasts kill 30 in Indian capital

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A series of blasts in the Indian capital of New Delhi on Saturday evening has killed at least 20 people and injured nearly 100. Five bombs went off in quick succession over less than 45 minutes, starting just after 6 p.m.

The type of bombs and the areas targeted make clear that the purpose was to inflict as many casualties on innocent civilians as possible. The bombs were all low-tech devices using ammonium nitrate as the explosive, laced with screws, nails and other pieces of metal to maximise the injuries. Two blasts occurred outside a major railway station in the heart of the city, another in a nearby park, the fourth in an upmarket shopping area and the fifth at a crowded market area.

A group calling itself the Indian Mujahedeen has reportedly claimed responsibility for the explosions, sending emails just minutes before the explosions to several television stations. The 13-page message, entitled “An Eye for an Eye,” declared that “the dust will never settle down”.

The email said the bombings were in revenge for the destruction of the sixteenth century Babri mosque in Ayodhya in northern India. The demolition of the mosque in 1992 by right-wing Hindu fanatics associated with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) triggered widespread communal violence throughout India and South Asia.

Police claim that the Indian Mujahedeen is linked to the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and is responsible for other bombings. The group is being blamed for a blast at Jaipur in the state of Rajasthan in May that killed 61 people; multiple bombs at Ahmadabad in the state of Gujarat in July that claimed 45 lives; and a series of blasts in July in Bangalore that killed one person.

Government officials also allege that SIMI has ties to Pakistan-backed groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba that

oppose Indian rule in the Muslim-majority state of Kashmir. The situation in Indian-controlled Kashmir is particularly tense at present after the government in New Delhi deployed tens of thousands of heavily armed police and troops last month to impose a curfew and suppress strikes and large protests demanding independence from India.

Following the blasts, police raided slum areas in New Delhi and detained 13 people for questioning. They also alleged that a suspected SIMI activist, Mohammed Subhan Querishi, was the mastermind behind the bombings and sent the email claiming responsibility.

To date, however, Indian authorities have provided no evidence to support their claims or any further information on the shadowy Indian Mujahedeen group or its alleged ties. While it is certainly possible that Islamic extremists spurred on by communal tensions, particularly in Kashmir, were responsible for the bombings, it cannot be ruled out that Hindu extremists or sections of the security apparatus were involved.

The Indian political and media establishment routinely blames any terrorist attack on Islamic fanatics and on its regional rival Pakistan. However, Hindu extremist groups, which played a major role in provoking recent unrest in Kashmir, also have a vested interest in inciting communal conflict and have no compunction about resorting to violence to achieve their ends.

Whoever perpetrated the indiscriminate killing of civilians last weekend, their actions have directly strengthened demands for a further boosting of the state apparatus and inroads into democratic rights. The Congress-led government has already signalled repressive measures. Following the blasts, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh pledged: “The challenge posed by terrorism and communalism will be fought tooth and nail.”

The opposition Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) has

seized on the blasts to reinvigorate its Hindu supremacist agenda and berate the Singh government for its “security failure”. Leading BJP figure, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi told the media that he had told Singh and his national security adviser 10 days ago of plans to bomb New Delhi. Modi claimed that his information came from the police interrogation of suspects arrested over July’s Ahmadabad bombing.

Modi is notorious for his role in the 2002 anti-Muslim pogroms in Gurajat after a train fire killed a number of Hindu extremists. Following the fire, gangs of thugs set out on a rampage of violence in which at least 2,000 men, women and children were killed, many more were beaten or raped, and Muslim businesses and homes were burnt to the ground. Modi exploited the communal tensions to win the state elections later that year.

Addressing the concluding session of the party’s three-day national executive meeting on Sunday, BJP leader L.K. Advani launched into a scathing attack on the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) as “spineless” and a “curse” for the country. He demanded Singh step down immediately and call fresh elections, promising that a BJP-led government would reinstate the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) that was used to detain hundreds of people without trial, particularly in Kashmir.

“Under UPA rule,” Advani declared, “terrorists have no fear because the Congress party and its government are gripped with fear—the fear of losing vote-banks—when it comes to taking uncompromising legal and administrative measures against terrorism.” A resolution drawn up at the BJP meeting attacked the UPA for withdrawing the POTA laws and failing “to control the influx of Pakistan-trained militants into Kashmir”. It further demanded strong diplomatic action against Pakistan.

The BJP’s resort to strident communalism is no accident. Facing a series of state elections and with national elections due by next May, the party is seeking to divert attention from its own record in power. In the 2004 national elections, the ruling BJP-led coalition suffered a humiliating defeat amid mass discontent over the impact of its economic restructuring policies on living standards.

The UPA, which came to power, was compelled to withdraw the POTA legislation in the face of

widespread opposition to its anti-democratic measures. The Singh government, however, amended the 1967 Unlawful Activities Prevention Act to include substantial sections of the POTA laws and maintain sweeping powers for security forces against so-called terrorist organisations.

Along with the BJP, sections of the media are also demanding tougher laws. A comment in the *Times of India* declared: “When a country is at war, there cannot be any half-measures to hit back and contain the enemy.” An editorial in the *Hindustan Times* argued similarly: “It’s time firmer anti-terror laws are put in place—never mind where the suggestions come from. Unless, of course, we’re still waiting for terrorists to have a sudden change of heart.”

Prime Minister Singh’s comments indicate that his government is already preparing to crack down. While his Congress Party claims to be secular, it has a long history of exploiting communalism for its own political purposes. As a result, the government is particularly susceptible to accusations from the BJP and the Indian media that it has failed to deal with Islamic “terrorists” and India’s rival Pakistan.



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