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## Mumbai rocked, Pakistan suspected

By Raja Murthy  
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MUMBAI - Like a deadly unwanted relative refusing to sever connections, terrorism revisited Mumbai after nearly three years, with three bomb blasts on the evening of July 13. Twenty-one people have died in the explosions and over 140 injured. The death toll is rising.

The bombs exploded at around 6.45 pm: outside a school bus stop in suburban Dadar, the busy jewelry market zone of Zaveri Bazar and the diamond trading district at the Opera House area in south Mumbai. The timing and location of the explosives showed intent to target heavily crowded areas during rush hour.

Mumbai police commissioner Arup Patnaik told media personnel at the blast sites that the bombs at Zaveri Bazaar and Opera

House seemed to have been high-intensity improvised explosive devices (IEDs), judging by the damage in the two areas. The Dadar bus stop bomb was of relatively lower intensity. The bombs exploded within 10 minutes of each other, Patnaik confirmed.

No terrorist group has yet claimed responsibility for the blasts, and no suspects have been officially named. From the familiar pattern of the attacks, security agencies unofficially mentioned the involvement of the so-called Indian Mujahideen. But this group of killers, said to be supported by, or a front for, the Pakistani terrorist outfit Lakshar-e-Taiba, has not sent its trademark e-mail to media outlets claiming credit for this latest exhibition of terror.

All the same, there can be little doubt that in the public's mind - and among officials - the attack carries the hallmark of Pakistani involvement; Indian officials have repeatedly accused Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence spy agency of helping coordinate and fund previous attacks.

Home Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram was quoted on Thursday as saying, "All groups hostile to India are under radar. We are not ruling out anything. We're looking at everyone and we will find out who is behind these attacks."

He added, "Whoever perpetrated these attacks has worked in a very, very clandestine manner. It's not a failure of intelligence."

The people of Mumbai might disagree.

The second of the three bombs exploded at a bus stop adjacent to walls of the St Antonio High School in Dadar, suburban Mumbai. During the day, the reconnoitering killers and bomb-planters would have seen and heard children playing on the slide and swings of the school playground that shares the same boundary wall with the bus stop.

"The school closes at 6.00 pm and fortunately the school children had left before the bomb exploded," said shocked Dadar resident Dinesh Chedde.

Kunal Shinde, a reporter with the Press Trust of India news agency, arrived at the blast site within 30 minutes of the explosion. "There was chaos," Shinde told Asia Times Online, "Bystanders carried away one person dead, and a lady had her hand blown off."

The Dadar blast was relatively less lethal, with the metal roof of the bus stop slightly mangled but intact; shop windows opposite had their panes shattered but the shop signs above survived. From across the road, balconies of residential buildings were crowded with unharmed householders interestedly viewing proceedings below.

The Zaveri Bazaar and Opera House bombs caused more fatal havoc. Eye-witnesses reported seeing severed limbs, diamonds and bloodied glass shards littering the bombed narrow lane with small eateries patronized by diamond traders. Most of the fatalities came from this bomb.

A rainy monsoon evening in Mumbai had delivered the latest reminder of the vulnerability of India's financial capital to serial terrorist attacks, the 15th since 1993. The attacks signal the end to a phase of peace since November 2008, when 10 coordinated shooting and bombing attacks across the city by militants led to the killing of 164 and wounding of at least 308.

"Not again," was the thought that popped instantly into mind as television channels flashed news about the bomb blasts at 7.00 pm. But history repeats itself, as they say, when lessons are not learned from history. And yet again senior Mumbai police officials were found wanting not just in preventing another terrorist attack, but in immediate responsibilities - such as credible information outflow.

No police spokesperson used the media to calm public nerves in the crucial first hour after the

attacks, when rumors fly and rage and panic can cause more damage. After nearly two decades of regular terrorist attacks, the Mumbai police force does not even have an official spokesperson, or a crisis control room that quickly kick-starts in such instances - failings one would have expected to have been corrected at least after 2008.

Three years ago, Pakistani-trained mercenaries went on a rampage that lasted 60 hours before they were gunned down by security forces, except for one captured survivor, Ajmal Kasab, from Faridkot village in Pakistan.

Kasab is now awaiting his convicted death sentence in Arthur Road Jail in central Mumbai. Some reports initially mentioned that Wednesday was Kasab's birthday, hinting that his pals could have set off the fatal bangs as a diabolic celebration, but court documents purportedly state Kasab was born on September 13, 1987.

Relative normalcy returned to Mumbai within hours of the blasts of July 13. At around 10.00 pm at the busy Dadar station, a key suburban commuting hub in central Mumbai, the flower ladies were smiling and selling garlands of jasmine and marigold within earshot of where the bomb had detonated. Dadar is one of older residential areas in Mumbai and has one of the biggest vegetable markets in the city.

About 200 meters west from Dadar station, at the blast site outside St Antonia School, a quiet crowd of over 200 onlookers mingled with police vehicles, rain-coated officials, a dozen television broadcasting sedans and a municipality crane trying to fix additional lighting to focus on the bomb spot in the dimly lit, tree-lined avenue.

The monsoon rains had paused, and long television cables slithered on the watery road like black snakes carrying images of tired-looking TV reporters trying to make sense of it all.

The three Mumbai blasts were the first major terrorist attack in India since 17 people were killed in the February 2010 bombing of the German Bakery cafeteria in Pune city, 150 kilometers from Mumbai. German Bakery, the name of separately owned pastry shops in some Indian towns popular with Westerners, sell the likes of brownies and brown bread and are tempting targets for both tourists and terrorists.

The July 13 blasts are the latest of recent indicators that the merchants of murder are crawling out of their holes after the intense spotlight on terrorist groups since the November 2008 attacks.

In May, a car bomb was found outside the New Delhi High Court, but lives were saved after apparently the electronic circuits in the explosive device malfunctioned in the severe summer of Delhi where temperatures can cross 45 degrees Celsius. American security agencies warned India earlier this month of an impending terrorist attack with suicide bombers.

Within hours of the latest hit, the Pakistan Foreign Ministry issued a statement that Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani had both condemned the attacks, and expressed distress at the loss of life and injuries.

But there seems little doubt the three blasts have damaged if not blown up a stuttering peace process between India and Pakistan since the 2008 attacks. The foreign ministers of the two countries are scheduled to meet in New Delhi on July 27. If this happens, quite likely there will be a different agenda on the table - such as what Pakistan plans to do with Kasab's trainers and terrorist sponsors in Pakistan.