

Is Bioterrorism Threat Credible?

Animesh Roul

The author is Executive Director Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict, New Delhi.

The big question is whether the threat of biological weapon use is real or a product of fearful future thinking? As far as terrorist groups are concerned, they not only wish to survive, but endeavor to thrive with continuous innovation and improvisation. The paucity of empirical data on terrorist use of biological weapons does not limit their future planning concerning biological weapon.

Even terrorists play pranks on WMD use these days! Late May 2008 a purported terrorist video caught media attention and some serious coverage. As per the reports, the Al Qaeda video message urged Islamic jihadists to use “biological, chemical and nuclear weapons to attack the West.” Experts suspecting the authenticity of the video message dismissed the threat as a prank and not ‘*Qaedaesque*’ enough to get scared.¹

Much water has been passed since the anthrax scare which had taken its limited toll against the most powerful country on earth immediately after the events of 9/11 terrorists events in the US. Though limited in its spread, experts have concluded that the worst situation would arise mainly due excessive human interference in the natural process of life. A substantial part of the threat also constitutes the malign use of naturally occurring organisms (biological agents) by mankind in general and terrorists in particular. There are many factors that attract a terrorist group towards biological weapons and biological weapons attack. Most important is their toxicity. In addition, their un-detectability and capacity to reproduce rapidly make biological weapons a weapon of choice for terror groups.

Biological Weapons Use: Real Time or Futuristic

The big question is whether the threat of biological weapon use is real or a product of fearful future thinking? Plausibly enough, we are passing through a time where innovation is the key to survive. But as far as terrorist groups are concerned, they not only wish to survive, but endeavor to thrive with continuous innovation and improvisation. Trends show that terrorists in South Asia, particularly in India, have always improvised their tactics and methods, be it in suicide attacks, serial blasts, handling improvised explosives using pressure cookers, hurling grenades recruiting unemployed civilians or in choosing targets (temples, Mosques and busy market places).² And if intelligence reports are to be believed,

they have graduated to snipers for targeting high-profile political or business personalities in India. In the face of this continuous up-gradation of terror tactics, use of biological weapon or deadly pathogen by terrorist groups or a 'lone wolf' into civilian population or targeting individuals, might be probable.

Equally imperative to note is the nature of the biological weapon agents. Biological weapon could be lethal in the hands of non-states actors like terrorists, religious cults, and Mafia syndicates. International terrorist outfits like Al Qaeda have made unexpected efforts in developing bio-weapon capability among other weapon of mass 'disruption/destructions (WMD) in the past and possibly, are doing so even now.

Historically, no terrorist group or religious cults achieved success in employing biological weapons or live pathogen at a large scale. However, there are ample evidences of the use of biological agents by some groups with little success. These attempts managed to scare and disrupt the society at large.

In 1984, the Rajneesh cult in Oregon, US, intentionally and indiscriminately contaminated a number of salad bars with a strain of salmonella bacteria. Over 700 people got affected with gastrointestinal illness, though nobody died in this incident. The cult members used commercially available biological agents to incapacitate people. Their aim was to win voters at bay during the local election. In 1994, a Japanese group called the Aum Shinrikyo unsuccessfully attempted to spread botulinum toxin and other agents in the city, before committing the dreaded subway Nerve gas attack. In 1998, a microbiologist linked to white-supremacist groups in the US had threatened military-grade anthrax in Las Vegas. His threat though later turned out to be harmless; generated widespread fear within civil society and security forces. The other important case occurred in post 9/11 terrorist strikes. Anthrax laced letter attacks causes five deaths and more than 15 people were severely ill. Unlike most other pathogens, anthrax is considered to be most potent and virulent. In 2003, at least four Ricin related incidents took place. In the beginning of the year, on

January 5, 2003, six Algerians, believed to be part of the 'Chechen network', Ansar al-Islam, a group linked to Al Qaeda and Iraq were arrested during a raid on a flat in Wood Green, North London, by the British security agencies. They were in the possession of Ricin. Castor seeds and equipments to make Ricin were also recovered from the flat. In March, traces of Ricin were found by the police in two phials inside a locker at Gare de Lyon railway station in Paris. On October 2003 a metallic container with Ricin was discovered at a Greenville, postal facility in South Carolina, United States. A November 2003 disclosure confirms that traces of Ricin were also found in mail bound for the White House. No one was hurt in any of the four cases, fortunately.

In South Asia, Tamil rebel groups had threatened to use biological materials against the native Sinhalese in the early 1980s. The rebels threatened to spread Bilbariasis and Yellow Fever in the country and allegedly laid out plans to attack rubber plantations and tea gardens using anti plant agents. Again in Sri Lanka, recently in March 2008, this scare tactic surfaced when the UN Department of Safety and Security, located at Baudhaloka Mawatha, Colombo, issued one intra organisation advisory following the receipt of suspicious packages with powder substance at one of the government agencies in Colombo. The suspicious packet was comprised of a threatening letter which contained a white powdery substance.

There are recent reports that Al Qaeda's Abdur Rauf, a Pakistani microbiologist has searched every corner of Europe to obtain anthrax spores and equipment for Al Qaeda bio-laboratory in Afghanistan to weaponise the pathogens, much before 9/11 events. Not to forget Menad Benchellali's covert activities and his quest to weaponise Ricin, before his arrest in early 2004, in his bio/chem laboratory in Lyon, France. Benchellali, an Al Qaeda trained terrorist, was convicted in 2006 along with 24 others. His handling of bio/chem material in small laboratory and expertise under terrorists' disposal opened a can of worms. Somebody has rightly pointed out that Benchellali's case had opened the door of secret world of bio-terrorism.

Why Islamist terrorist groups like Al Qaeda, are employing and indoctrinating scientists, trained microbiologists in its fold? The answer may be still unknown, but conventional wisdom suggests that there is a hidden design in place and that certainly involves intentional fiddling with life science and living organism. The picture is still hazy. The news about a couple of Indian origin doctors among others in their fraternity from Jordan and Iraq had been detained and suspected in connection with the foiled attacks in Glasgow and London last year might make the picture more clear.³ The attempted bomb attacks by trained doctors who have undergone life science and pathological laboratory training to save human life, now on a terror call, are certainly very disturbing. This is not all! Investigations into a terror web forum suggest that around 45 (all Muslim) doctors planned a consorted Jihad against the US.

Again, analysts have stumbled upon chemical and biological weapon manuals being circulated in Jihadi web forums over the internet. This finding makes the bioterror threat more plausible, even though, these openly available manuals can help terrorist to develop crude biological weapon with minimum lethal factor. A survey published by *Jane's Intelligence Review* (2007) indicates that chemical and biological weapons on password protected web forums constitute a part of jihadi discussion. At least two longer manuals on biological weapons have found in these Jihadi forums which describe methods for growing plague bacteria and botulinum toxin.⁴

Conclusion

Knowledge about the Aum Shinrikyo (Japan) and Rajneesh (Oregon, US) episodes is available, however one could only speculate the biological weapons capacity of international terror groups such as Al Qaeda's. This is perhaps to downplay the latter's reach and interests in acquiring and using them.

Of course, the intelligence community does not have the evidence about Al Qaeda or any terror outfit going beyond the initial exploratory. But the paucity of empirical data on terrorist use

of biological weapons does not limit their future planning concerning biological weapon. By leveling the whole bioterrorism issue as absurd would be too simplistic and immature on the parts of strategic thinkers or policy makers.

Knowledgeable observers opined that it is a matter of time car bombs would replace biological pathogen filled balloons, if not hi-tech delivery systems. Indeed, it is not very hard to stretch imagination on why five among the eight suspects have training in microbiology⁵ and working for Al Qaeda's Jihadi agenda. Opinion is still divided between the alarmists and those holding an imminent bioterrorism threat to be far-fetched. Though time and again this insidious threat has been downplayed by India's counter-terror mandarins citing non-existent earlier cases in this part of the world, it is just a matter of time to witness a germ unleash of apocalyptic nature.

References

1. "A Scary Prank About Al Qaeda and WMD", *New York Times Blog*, May28,2008, <http://helede.blogs.nytimes.com/>
2. Author's observation.
3. "Terror plot hatched in British ospitals", *The Independent*, July 3, 2007. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/terror-plot-hatched-in-british-hospitals-455630.html>
4. For more detail on these Jihadi web forums and their discussions, See, Anne Stenersen, "Chem-Bio Cyber Class," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, September 2007, pp. 8-13.
5. On Why a individual scientist engaged in pathogen research warrants careful monitoring, See, Christain Enemark, "Biological Attacks and the Non State Actor: A Threat Assessment," *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.21(6), December 2006, pp. 911-930.