

Mumbai in America

*By Gary Noesner, Chief, FBI Crisis Negotiation Unit
(retired)*

9/21/10

In November of 2008, heavily armed two man terrorist teams simultaneously struck multiple target sites in Mumbai, India, killing many, creating havoc, confusion, and mayhem. The Indian government was universally criticized for having a flawed, inefficient, and mismanaged response to that incident. What if such an event were to happen in a major U.S. city? Would we fare any better? Recent revelations suggest that our national counterterrorism program is hampered with unnecessary duplication from competing entities, all acting in an uncoordinated way. While these conditions concern intelligence gathering aimed at preventing acts of terrorism, what about incident response and management if we are attacked?

Can we realistically expect the many involved agencies to perform more effectively during a terrorist siege incident like Mumbai? U.S. law enforcement agencies are better staffed, trained, and equipped than their counterparts in Mumbai. Also, following the tragedy at Columbine, most law enforcement agencies have implemented “active shooter” training which

teaches street officers to quickly engage and neutralize the shooter(s); a capability the Indian police did not have.

But, what if the terrorists barricade themselves with hostages in a hotel, hospital, shopping center, or school, like what we saw in Mumbai? In such a scenario, decision making will ultimately fall to the U.S. government. While the President is ultimately in charge, who will actually manage the incident at the scene and what decision making authority will be given to that person? Will one lead agency really be in charge, or will other agencies try to jointly make decisions?

A myriad of agencies believe they have a clear mandate to respond to a terrorist incident. Can we really expect them to avoid conflict and confusion? The key is to rapidly set up an effective and agile response mechanism that can simultaneously respond to and stop the carnage, properly contain the spread of further violence, and open a dialogue with the terrorists in an attempt to prevent additional loss of life through negotiation efforts, or by tactical intervention if necessary. Past government incident drills have focused on establishing joint command posts with a seat at the table for each agency. Decision making by consensus and giving everyone a role seems to be the primary take away. Unfortunately, this model does not well suit rapid decision making under exigent circumstances.

Who will be in charge and their decision making authority needs to be clarified in advance, not during the incident. The answer maybe less clear than you think. A Mumbai type incident may quickly demonstrate that our nation suffers not from a lack of resources but from an overabundance of entities whose work, actions, and mandates are too complex to work well during a siege. We simply appear to have too many cooks in the kitchen and we aren't sure what we are trying to make.

During my 30 year career in the FBI, I have seen this unnecessarily complex response process impede effective decision making during several real-life siege incidents. Clear and decisive leadership in crisis has always been the weak link (think of Waco). Incident decision makers need to do more than just coordinate with all involved agencies; they need to be able to fully understand the ongoing interaction with the terrorists, and then rapidly make tough decisions. Have they studied past terrorist acts or been trained on the coordinated use of negotiations and tactics? Despite what the public believes, most have not.

The last major case I worked before retiring from the FBI was the 2002 D.C. sniper incident. FBI, ATF, and local law enforcement agencies from several

jurisdictions presented a unified face to the public, but behind the scenes management was often chaotic, counterproductive, and confusing. No entity or individual was ever definitively placed in charge. Such an approach could bode disaster in a rapidly paced terrorist incident.

Few in the government have actual experience or received adequate training. The FBI's last major terrorist siege was over 10 years ago. What were the lessons learned for leadership? Are those lessons being taught? We can also count on a host of high level governmental officials inserting themselves into incident management. This will probably impede timely and effective decision making and could spell disaster.

Before such an event happens, we need to declare that a particular entity will be clearly (not jointly) in charge. This is no time for political correctness. In my strong view, this should be the FBI for all domestic situations. We then need to ensure that those individuals appointed to make decisions during an incident actually receive quality training on how to best use the vast resources at their disposal. This is not properly being done now. A terrorist siege may not be the most likely scenario we face; however, can we afford to be as unprepared as we currently are?