

Watch: Suspected suicide bombers walk into elevator of Colombo hotel

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A CCTV footage reportedly shows two of the suspected suicide bombers inside an elevator of the Shangri-La Hotel in Sri Lanka's Colombo moments before they blew themselves up on Easter Sunday.

The latest footage comes after another suspected suicide bomber was seen entering St Sebastian's church in Negombo, where 200 people were killed in the deadliest of the six near-simultaneous attacks.

Nine suicide bombers, including a woman, killed nearly 360 people in coordinated attacks on three churches and four luxury hotels in the island country. National Thowheed Jamath, a local Islamist group, is suspected of being involved in planning the attacks, for which the Islamic State militant group has claimed responsibility.

The suspected terrorists can

be seen in the 65-second footage walking down a corridor and then inside the elevator talking to each other as they head to the third floor of the Shangri-La Hotel.

The men are seen wearing similar backpacks and caps and getting out of the elevator. They are then seen walking into a third-floor restaurant, Table One, which was serving a brunch service. A number of people are also seen in the footage inside the restaurant.

The CCTV footage was shared by news agency ANI and aired by a local Sri Lankan television channel.

The ISIS released a video late on Tuesday through its AMAQ news agency, showing eight men, all but one with their faces covered, standing under a black Islamic State flag, declaring loyalty to its leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.

The one man in the video with his face uncovered was Mohamed Zahran Bin Hashim, a Sri Lankan preacher

known for militant views. He blew himself up at Shangri-La hotel in Colombo, primary investigations have revealed. News agency Reuters reported that two of the bombers were brothers, sons of a wealthy spice trader. Inshaf Ibrahim, a 33-year-old copper factory owner, detonated his explosive device at the busy breakfast buffet of the luxury Shangri-La hotel, it reported.

A senior Sri Lankan official has said that most of the bombers were well-educated and came from "economically strong families" and some of them went abroad to study. Ten Indians were among those killed in the serial blasts in Sri Lanka on Sunday.

The Sri Lankan government has invoked emergency powers after the devastating bomb attacks. The emergency law, which gives police and the military extensive powers to detain and interrogate suspects without court orders, came into effect at midnight on Monday.

Post-Balakot, Pakistan scrambled jets from 8 bases. Was 10 minutes late: IAF report

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"The strategic surprise" of the Balakot airstrikes by the Indian Air Force in the Khyber Pakhtunwara region of Pakistan on February 26 was "complete and total" despite Pakistan being on high alert, according to a report on "the lessons learnt" from the operation, which also mentions that five of the six designated targets were hit, the first official acknowledgement of the number of targets.

The report, a detailed assessment of the positives and negatives of the operation, to be used as a reference for future operations, was discussed at a high-level meeting of IAF recently.

On February 26, in response to a suicide bombing attack by a Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) terrorist on a CRPF convoy in Pulwama, Jammu and Kashmir, that killed 40 troopers, and to pre-empt more such attacks, IAF struck a training camp of the Pakistan-based JeM in Balakot. There's been a lot of discussion and debate on the attack, including on the damage inflicted, but the report marks the first time IAF discussed the operation's effectiveness.

The assessment has revealed several positives, but because "no battle plan ever survives the first contact with the enemy", there were also deviations from the plan, and some outright negatives too. The mission "was accomplished" because of "redundancies" built into the plan, the report, a copy of which has been reviewed by HT, says.

The Positives



The "strategic surprise" was so complete that only after IAF's Mirage-2000s delivered the weapons package and turned back did Pakistan scramble jets from "as many as eight fighter bases". These included the Pakistan Air Force base Mushaf in Sargoda, Rafiqi in Shorkot, Minhas in Kamra Attock, and Murid in Chakwal. "But the distance between PAF and IAF fighters was at least 10 minutes," a senior officer in the security establishment said on condition of anonymity. "Pakistan was expecting a response, but from the PAF response it appears it did not expect us to take the aerial route," the officer added.

The "accuracy" of intelligence and the subsequent target selection is one of the positives the report talks about. "With this quality of intelligence, we can hit any target inside Pakistan within three hours," a second senior security establishment official said, asking not to be named.

Among the other positives, the report lists the proficiency and skills of pilots who flew the mission,

and describes them as "top class". Keeping in the tradition of IAF, the Commanding Officers (CO) of the respective squadrons flew the mission. All pilots who flew the mission are likely to be awarded for their skill and ability. Importantly, although nearly 6,000 men and officers of IAF were involved in the execution - aircraft flew from different airbases spread across India - there were "no leakages".

Deception at the strategic and tactical level deceived Pakistan, the report says. While Chief of Air Staff BS Dhanoa and the top echelon of IAF went about normal duties - including attending conferences, banquets, and addressing Defence Attachés, so-called Combat Air Patrols along the border areas - before the strike lulled Pakistan to some extent. Importantly, during the attack, a strike-element of Russian made Su-30s flying towards Bahawalpur, Pakistan, where the JeM is based, forced the neighbouring country to divert its energies and air defence capabilities in a separate sector.

Finally, the accuracy of the weapons have also come in for praise in the report. IAF used Spice 2000 precision guided munitions (PGM) to hit the target, among others. "Five of the six designated targets" inside the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) training camp in Balakot were hit directly, the assessment report has concluded.

The Negatives

Cloud cover and weather conditions did create problems for the fighter fleet, the report says. Importantly, the entire weapons package - apart from the Spice 2000 - carried by the IAF fleet wasn't delivered, leading to questions about weapon to target matching. Changes in the software made to integrate new

weapon systems with vintage Mirage aircraft didn't completely work. IAF use indigenous skills to integrate the new weapons systems. "The Balakot experience underlines integration of new weapons with platforms should be done by the Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) despite the cost involved," said a senior official aware of the assessment, who did not want to be named.

The other "negative" listed in the report is in the politico-strategic domain. IAF, when planning the attack, gave priority to eliminating the maximum number of terrorists at the JeM facility. It chose Spice 2000 - a penetration smart bomb - over a fragmentation weapon. The former penetrates structures killing everyone inside whereas the latter flattens and demolishes structures.

"When questions were raised about the strike, especially internationally, IAF didn't have much by way of pictures to show as evidence making it easy for Pakistan to deny the attack itself," a third senior officer in the security establishment said, asking not to be identified.

Recommendations

Looking ahead and taking the lessons from the Balakot strike, IAF wants more "technological asymmetry" to be able to "penetrate the enemy airspace at will", according to the report. It will be looking at better air defence capabilities. The induction of new platforms such as the Russian made S-400 surface to air anti-aircraft missile systems will fill part of the gap.

According to a former senior air force official, India should concentrate on absorbing more defence technology. "Technological asymmetry will always give you an edge over the enemy. However, if the OEM [original equipment manufacturer, or the supplier] is the same on either, it could create difficulties," said former Air Vice Marshal Sunil Jayant Nanodkar.

"We achieved complete surprise and the mission was successful. It highlights the need to give forces the freedom to execute a political decision. The execution of a political decision should be at choosing of the forces," he added.

A video call from wife cost ND Tiwar's son Rohit Shekhar his life, say cops

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It took barely two minutes for a quarrel between an estranged husband and wife to turn into a murder on the morning of April 16. For Delhi Police, it took over a week to establish that the wife was the alleged killer. A video call had triggered the quarrel and a taunt about a shared glass of alcohol with another woman (name withheld) had led to the murder, police said.

The events leading to the murder of 40-year-old Rohit Shekhar Tiwari, son of former UP chief minister ND Tiwari, began around 5.30pm on April 15, while he was returning to Delhi from Kathgodam in Uttarakhand, where he had gone to cast his vote.

Travelling in three cars, Shekhar was accompanied by his mother Ujjwala Tiwari, his distant sister-in-law, her husband and a posse of employees. Police said Shekhar and his distant sister-in-law occupied the rear seat of one car and they were being served alcohol by an employee, identified as Golu.

"Shekhar and the other woman (distant sister-in-law) had finished an entire bottle of liquor during the journey," said Rajiv Ranjan, additional commissioner of police (crime branch), while clarifying that the duo was not in a relationship.

But Shekhar's 35-year-old wife, Apoorva Shukla Tiwari, hated her sister-in-law. "Apoorva saw the woman as the reason for her impending divorce. She disapproved of the woman's proximity to her husband," said Ranjan.

At 5.30pm, Apoorva made a video call to Shekhar to ask about dinner. Shekhar allegedly tried to hide the woman during the video call, but she had got enough hints. "The sound of bangles and the glimpse of a woman's clothes had caught Apoorva's attention," said an investigator.

When the group reached

Shekhar's Defence Colony bungalow around 10pm, the woman had also walked in with him. But Apoorva chose not to rake up this issue, police said.

Since Shekhar was "heavily drunk", Apoorva served him dinner. The couple then retired to their bedrooms on the first floor. Half an hour later, Shekhar's mother walked into the house and called the couple for a chat. Soon, Shekhar complained of uneasiness and retired to his room later, an officer said.

Apoorva watched television until 12.45am before she decided to visit her husband's bedroom and confront him about the woman in the car, said the officer.

"When Apoorva began quarrelling with Shekhar, he told her that he and the other woman had been drinking from the same glass in the car. That enraged Apoorva and she pounced on him, strangled his neck and then smothered him to prevent him from screaming. She then used her bare hands to kill him," said the investigator.

Rajiv Ranjan said Shekhar was too drunk to put up a fight and his bypass heart surgery, less than a year ago, had left him physically weak. "No one in the house got to know of the crime". Another officer said that Apoorva didn't know how to react after the murder and spent the next hour pacing around in Shekhar's bedroom. "She left for her own bedroom around 2am, but couldn't sleep," said the officer.

At 9am, Golu peeped inside Shekhar's room to find him sleeping and decided not to disturb him as he knew of his insomnia and his habit of sleeping till late. "In the meantime, Shekhar's mother Ujjwala Tiwari, who lives at her Tilak Lane home, tried contacting her son. But Apoorva kept telling her not to disturb his sleep," said the officer.

Around 3.30pm, Apoorva finally sent Golu to wake Shekhar up. "But Golu

found Shekhar to be unresponsive and bleeding from his nose. When he shook him a little, Shekhar started bleeding from his mouth. Golu raised the alarm after which an ambulance was called," said the officer. Shekhar was later declared brought dead at Max Super Speciality hospital. The police sent the body for autopsy and recorded the statements of Shekhar's wife and mother. The body was cremated, but the crime branch said that the room was sealed soon after.

Once the autopsy report pointed to murder, the police probed the role of all occupants of the house, but focused on three persons mainly - Apoorva, Golu and driver Akhilesh. A CCTV camera installed on the ground floor confirmed that only these three had access to Shekhar that night, said the police.

"Golu and Akhilesh were totally dependent on Shekhar for their livelihood. But there were discrepancies in Apoorva's statements," said the officer. Apoorva finally ran out of stories and confessed.

Two terrorists killed in encounter J&K

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In Jammu and Kashmir, two terrorists were killed in an encounter with security forces in Bijbehara area of Anantnag district this morning.

The encounter broke out during an anti-terror operation which was launched by the forces late last night on the basis of specific information about the presence of terrorists in the area.

21 Opposition leaders seek review of SC order on matching of VVPAT slips with EVMs

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Twenty one Opposition leaders have moved the Supreme Court seeking review of its order on matching of Voter-verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slips with Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs). The leaders reiterated their request for counting at least 50 per cent of the VVPAT slips. This plea was turned down by the apex court earlier

this month. The court had then directed the Election Commission to increase random matching of VVPAT slips with EVMs from one to five polling booths per assembly segment in the ongoing general elections. Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu yesterday sought the review of the order saying that the increase from one to five is not a reasonable number.

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