

## Soft Targets

Defending them takes an international effort

**The re-election of German Chancellor Angela Merkel in September 2009 — seen as a good thing for the European Union — came with an al-Qaida warning.**

An operative known as “Abu Talha the German” warned in a video message that “bitter times await the Germans” because the nation continues to support the war in Afghanistan. Merkel’s re-election likely means German forces will remain in Afghanistan.

However, the terror group’s threat to strike Germany will not influence the country’s democratic process, German Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble said in a story posted on Der Spiegel Online. “We will not allow ourselves to fall into a state of anxiety, which is what the terrorists hope to achieve with attacks.”

Any terrorist attack on Germany will most likely be against “soft targets.” These are undefended or lightly guarded sites that are becoming the targets of choice for terrorist groups, reported Stratfor, a global intelligence company. Soft targets include churches, shopping centers, sports arenas, nightclubs, theaters, bars, restaurants and hotels where it may be easy to kill or injure a large number of people.

Such threats are not new to Germans, most of whom are used to strict security measures at home. The 2009 Oktoberfest celebrations in Munich provided a good example of that. Armed police were visible everywhere and people had to enter the city center through a single checkpoint. Overhead, a no-fly zone was in effect.

Terrorists are increasingly aiming at soft targets because a small group of their dedicated operatives can inflict much chaos and destruction. Plus, such attacks become the instant focus of international news media, as was the case during the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai, India.

“We have seen that there is a global trend now to attack Western hotels,” Rohan Gunaratna, head of the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in Singapore,

told the Agence France-Presse.

During the Mumbai assault, terrorists attacked hotels, but also hit public transportation systems. In July 2009, terrorists attacked Western hotels in Jakarta, Indonesia. American counter-terrorism officials warn that an al-Qaida training manual lists “blasting and destroying the places of amusement, immorality and sin ... and attacking vital economic centers” among its priorities.

Attacks on soft targets do not net terrorists the same “political and ideological mileage” as hitting defended military targets — such as the U.S. outpost attack in Afghanistan in October 2009 that left eight Soldiers dead — Stratfor reported. Attacks on defended military targets may or may not receive international media attention. However, condemnation of attacks on soft targets is almost universal.

But heinous as they may be, these types of attacks have caused an awakening in anti-

Smoke billows from the J.W. Marriott hotel in Jakarta, Indonesia, where terrorists set off an explosion in July 2009. Terrorism experts have observed a global trend toward attacks on Western hotels.



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terrorism thinking and a spur in counterterrorism measures. For example, many global hotel chains now provide counterterrorism training to their staffs. Some have beefed up internal communications to include terrorism updates. Others are increasing physical security at their hotels by providing visible guards, prominent security cameras, anti-vehicle barriers and evacuation plans. Some are building new hotels away from main traffic areas for increased protection.

Terrorist attacks have also encouraged international collaboration. The U.N. Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee helps nations apply U.N. guidelines to counter terrorist activities at home, in their regions and around the world. The committee encourages nations to exchange practices they use to counter terrorism. It urges nations to work together to investigate, detect, arrest, extradite and prosecute terrorists.

“Terrorism is a global challenge that requires a global and integrated response rooted in the rule of law and respect for human rights,” Jean-Paul Laborde said. The special advisor to the U.N. undersecretary general for political affairs addressed an international group attending a workshop on national counterterrorism focal points in Vienna in October 2009.

Some countries and international agencies already share information to fight terrorism. The international police agency Interpol and the EU’s Europol manage large databases and

help nations with analysis and counterterrorism actions. The two agencies are helping to implement U.N. Resolution 1822, which monitors international sanctions against al-Qaida and the Taliban. One goal is to improve transparency among countries and identify terrorists on a list all nations can share.

“What we are looking for is a credible list in the fight against terrorism,” Austrian Ambassador Thomas Mayr-Harting, chairman of the U.N.’s al-Qaida and Taliban sanctions committee, said in a story on talkradionews.com. “There is a whole technique in this process. We write to the countries involved and we wait for their responses.”

The cooperation process can be slow. But India is one nation already exchanging counterterrorism information with the EU. There is also a mutual legal-assistance treaty under review, India’s Business Standard Web site reported. India and the EU also want to increase the ties between Europol and its Indian counterpart, the Central Bureau of Investigation.

“We really want to explore what we can do more together, learn from each other. We need to work on several fronts,” Gilles de Kerchove, the EU’s counterterrorism coordinator, said in a July 2009 report by the Press Trust of India.

The aim is for India and the EU to share intelligence and research and to increase the skills of their counterterrorism security forces. The U.N. encourages other nations to follow suit. □

An Indian Soldier holds a position outside the Taj Mahal Hotel, in Mumbai, India, during an assault by Islamic militants in November 2008 that killed more than 170 people.