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Releasing Masood Azhar was a political decision

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[Ajit Doval, KC - Former Director, VIF](#)[View1072](#)[Comments 0](#)

At a time that fresh debate has broken over the handling of the IC-814 hijack, former IB Director **AK Doval** makes controversial revelations on the Kandaha in a candid interview to **Harinder Baweja**

The impression about intelligence agencies is that they fail to provide advance information in each important instance whether it's K Akshardham, Ayodhya and intelligence agencies form a huge bulk of our government. Is this criticism fair in your opinion?

That's totally unfair. The only people competent of making this charge are the consumers of intelligence. Others are speculating and working on a Hypothesis that had it been known, it could have been prevented. This hypothesis itself is faulty. There are many things which we know, but despite the mitigation it, at times we can prevent it, but at times there are compulsions, there are situations, there are factors by which it cannot go beyond a point. There is the second factor. That many things that happen there is not any preparation, or planning, or conspiracy behind it for that particular event. Intelligence denied knowledge which exists somewhere. There is a much larger mechanism of preventive security apparatus that we ensure that even if a terrorist depredation, there is security apparatus; there is a defensive mechanism, which will prevent him from doing that because there is an awareness. Third point intelligence. If I say that Pakistan is training terrorists and sending them to India --- is that a correct intelligence or a wrong report? It is correct, it is not sufficiently refined for action. Now if someone improves on it and says that five persons will strike in Delhi. A lot of expertise would have gone into this, agencies may say this maybe right but what do we do with it. Who are these persons? Where are they? Then you are able to say they have come with photographs. These are their descriptive roles. You keep on refining information till a point comes when the intelligence refinement stops and agencies ground have to take on the baton. The process involves a gap, a mismatch. At different stages, you keep refining it. I say now it is your ball, take it to the passing the ball from center-line to the D. Eleven passes might have brought the ball to the 16-yard line, it is not necessary that the goal will be scored. most of the time. It is not that we don't know who Lashkar-e-Toiba is, what are their cadre, where have they been trained, what are their macro objectives, are they carrying.

The challenge is to degrade their capability....

Degrading the capability is that if there are 15,000 weapons, you make it to 5,000 weapons. If the cadre strength is 9,000, you reduce it to 500. Reduce the 15 to two places. Which I think the Indian intelligence agencies can be given all the credit for. The best in the world...

Despite Jama Masjid, Sankat Mochan..

Events can happen. What were their intentions. For example, 53,000 weapons have been seized in Kashmir alone since the militancy started. About 60,000 seized. This is capability degradation.

But they can still come out...

There is nothing good enough. It is not more than 7-8 per cent of the total RDX that has come into this country. More than 93 percent has been neutralized enough.

Do you accept that there was complete intelligence failure in Kargil?

No. There was a definite intelligence about it. There was a definite communication sent to the people concerned. The only defence given by certain agencies marked to a person and perhaps it didn't reach the person sitting on the other side of the table.

But that's shameful, isn't it? Intelligence is available, but it gets lost in a sea of red tape.

That is a different thing. We are talking about intelligence. The fact that the Pakistanis planned it, the fact that people had come, that people were being trained in the Kargil area for an offensive was known well in advance, on June 2 (1998). Nine months before, it was alerted. After it was informed, the physical intelligence was by the people who patrol that area. They wait on paper to patrol that area.

On paper?

That is what the inquiry commission said. I don't trust or mistrust Brig Surinder Singh but he said they went to those places, said (they) received that activity. For an intelligence person, it's a feedback. He is quite happy and satisfied when someone says okay, we had tried, we had got very authentic intelligence planning like this. You have physically gone there, you have physically been there, physically lived in those areas and come to the conclusion that it is not everything that comes to us is correct and infallible. Perhaps, there is a certain amount of complacency.

500-600 soldiers lost because intelligence was not properly acted upon...

What is properly? Let's define the word 'properly'.

You tell me?

'Properly' is that if you had been given input for physical action, you follow it up with action. If you don't take the physical action, it's your problem. This was signed personally by the then director Shyamal Dutta. Directors of the IB don't sign unless it's something extremely important. It is signed by much junior officers.

extremely important when they sign it. In this case, it was signed personally by the director, Intelligence Bureau. It was sent personally by him to the de Director General Military Intelligence (DGMI) and various officers.

And yet the corps commander in Kashmir said it was a localised affair?

The point is that after this information had gone into the system, it should have been verified. Somebody should have gone and said the heights that you places you are mentioning about, we have seen this movement. The process of refining starts. It is a cycle.

Either it is right or wrong. In this case, the intelligence was right...

It was right but that doesn't complete the thing. Even if the intelligence was right or wrong, it should have been verified. As Brigadier Surinder said, the years but not actually to the places that they were showing in the logbooks. Probably they were going but the real actual patrolling was not being conducted, function limited to the intelligence organisation. The entire security apparatus, both are recipients as well as the providers of intelligence. Even the rules of keep on informing the Intelligence Bureau on a regular basis. Had they gone on patrolling and found something, some cigarette butts, blade or anything from looks unusual. Now when this input comes, we go deeper into that. Similarly, when we provide them, they work on that. If they give us the feedback, then stops. It's like a circuit. Everybody should take the responsibility.

So you are saying that in the note signed by Shyamal Dutta, there was particular information on the heights where the Pakistani army had lo

That letter is so specific. It talks about Kargil, Tiger Hill and other features. Every word is well chosen. Even the Kargil committee hasn't dismissed it. All marked to the DGMO, it was marked to the DGMI.

Isn't that a ridiculous argument?

I think this is no argument at all. The fact is that it has been fed into the system. If a letter comes to the director, Intelligence Bureau, who it should go second thing was that they said was that it was not sufficiently specific. Yes, provided a reply to this letter had come. They then said we had gone the anything, but there are two or three things (observations) we have got to make and we would like to have further details on it. If you whitewash it can exist...

You mean to say they didn't respond to the letter?

There was no response to the note that Shyamal Dutta sent. If the agency provides the information, the user agency must invariably provide the feedback. If the information is wrong, responsibility would be fixed back home. Fix the people who are deliberately, by design, by default, by inefficiency, by any other reason. And reward the persons who are giving the right information, who have got the access, who have got the knowledge. Until then the system will not work. A goal is required for deciding what should be the course of the journey. What will be the direction of the inquiry will depend upon the query you raise. If it doesn't have the time, capability or the application to raise those intelligence queries based on hard professionalism, probably the system cannot deliver even the best of intelligence.

So you are telling me that there was precise, specific information. Some valuable Indian soldiers' life could have been saved.

No. What I am telling you is that Kargil didn't come as a surprise to me. I was posted there not when the attack took place, but when the information was sent from Srinagar when the first information came. When Shyamal Dutta had sent the note, the input had come so I am aware of it. When this communication came from Srinagar. I knew it. I trusted it. Many questions were asked by the DIG, how are you so sure? Dutta is a stickler for perfection, detail. He is not someone who dotted line without asking a 1000 questions.

So, in this system which you were a part of, there is a clear lack of coordination.

See, there is a lot of scope for improvement.

Why didn't heads roll? It's a serious lapse.

I think accountability is extremely important. We have got to differentiate between the wheat and the chaff.

Heads should have rolled...

I won't say heads should have rolled, but there should be a system to acknowledge both good and bad work. There should be accountability for intelligence produced in this country is applied, we would be able to do much better. The intelligence gets bureaucratised.

But that's a serious crime. We are talking about national security...

It is something which involves peoples' lives and national security.

But somebody should be made responsible for that lapse...

There should be accountability. One important improvement that we require is to make a determinable, specific, accountable system where something wrong can be let the people be judged. There are quality people, there are mediocres, and there are very bad people. If you don't have the system, bad currency will drift out.

Is that one of the reasons why we are seeing attacks in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka. Why is the jihadi train able to travel far and wide

There are many reasons for it. One of the reasons is that the people who are masterminding this are not looking at India with a Kashmir-specific agenda. They have an anti-India agenda. Up to a point, they were targeting a certain area. They are now looking at the map of India as the total target area.

How come they are succeeding?

The second factor is that they have been able to establish modules which they have been trying for sometime. Whenever you have to operate in a city, you have to develop some friends, you have to exchange some contacts, you have to find the area where you can keep the weapons and explosives, you have to select a place to hit, then you have to find out the time at which you can enter the area. For that they establish the modules. And I was very concerned about these modules in Kashmir. The number of modules busted was almost one per week outside Kashmir and the Northeast. That is the module where people were living in a camouflage with a Hindu identity. But they were actually the people who had come from Pakistan, who had been trained in Pakistan, they had started some business dispensary. And they were become centres from where the coordination would be done. If a man had to come from Pakistan if it had been decided that an agent he knew what was the module and the person who is there. If he has got a codename, he coordinates. If he has got some weapons, he will provide him the needs a taxi, an air or rail ticket, he will provide him that.

Why? Does that mean we are less vigilant?

It requires a certain level of expertise and vigilance.

Instead of terrorists being on the run, they are expanding.

Yes, that is right. It's a physical reality that they are expanding.

Why have they been able to expand?

Probably because they are not on the run.

Why are they not on the run?

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They are not the ones who are indulging in these actions. But it is their neutralisation that leads to the neutralisation of the terrorists. We have done a lot.

You don't need intelligence to find out that Jama Masjid is a sensitive area. Why did the incident take place?

There are occasions when there are failures.

So the terrorists are getting the better of us. Sankatmochan one day, Jama Masjid the next...

No, there have been few instances in the past but there is definite scope for improvement. And there are competent officers who would be looking into this.

But as an Indian, I worry.

It's very good you are worried and all of us should be worried. More than you, people in the security set-up would be worried. And they are doing a lot about

I am worried because I see terrorists expanding their area of operation.

Give us some good information. It's a vigilant society that can play a very important role.

How wise was it to release Maulana Masood Azhar, who is far more dangerous today than he was prior to his arrest and subsequent release?

It's not an issue on which a comment can be made on a specific (case). It's a much larger (issue) where the political leaders have to take a decision.

From a security point of view, as a senior intelligence officer who has to do the groundwork, how wise was it?

If we had a choice to release him or not, we shouldn't have released him.

That means we had no choice.

From the security point of view, every choice is acceptable whatever is the choice of the government. If on political considerations and larger national interest this choice is not available, then obviously...

There was public reaction, (reaction) in the media. The media played a certain role. They created a national hysteria as if...

It's easy to blame the media, but the policy has to come from the government of the day.

Creating a national hysteria means creating an impression that the government doesn't care for the lives of its people. People started quoting the Rubai asking why militants were exchanged in return for the former home minister's daughter. If you ask any police officer, any intelligence officer, if you ask me,

So politics overtakes national considerations...

Larger national considerations take precedence over segmented national considerations. Security, intelligence, segmented national consideration. Politician of the present, but also of the future, also of the coming generation, various other things. If it was done in case of Rubaiya, probably it must have been done (by government) thought was correct at that point of time. In case of Kandahar, probably they would have done for reasons they thought it was correct at that point

Yet in the aftermath, it's you who had to....

Honestly, should I tell you. It really doesn't matter. Probably, I have seen more terrorists physically or dead, either in confinement or outside than anyone doesn't know how to fabricate an IED. Neither he is a marksman.

But he is a motivator...

He is a very venomous speaker. Sajjad Afghani was a much bigger fighter.

So you say it didn't really make a difference...

No, that's not the point I am making. The level of militancy doesn't go with the personality. I will tell you what matters: number of militants you have got you can replenish your militants, your fidayees, your weapons, your supply system, putting them in place, motivating the people and training them.

Are you saying that releasing Masood, Omar Sheikh and Latram didn't give a fillip to the terrorist movement?

What I am saying (is) that individuals, five here and 10 there, don't matter. A large number of people have been neutralised in Kashmir and the rest of the really matter either way as long as the system continues. It's a part of degradation...

But where's the degradation? They have expanded their area of operation.

You are talking about the individuals. Individuals and movements have got two different loci.

Suicide attacks outside J&K Assembly, outside Srinagar airport. Suicide attacks began after Masood Azhar's release.

From 1989-96, you couldn't hold any elections in J&K, they would keep coffins outside the polling booths and no one would cast their vote. Masood Azhar was released in 1999, after his release, elections have continuously been held. There has been greater political activity, greater tourism. After Masood Azhar's release, tourism up to 200 percent, civil construction work, democracy...

Are you justifying his release?

No. They are unrelated. It would be wrong to say that because Masood Azhar is gone, democracy came in.

Tomorrow, if there is another attack, we would be forced to release five more people. Is that okay?

I am totally against releasing militants. As a principle, there should be no (compromise) on hijacking. I am totally against releasing any terrorists.

Why cannot we have a policy like the Americans who don't negotiate?

That's a national policy. The UPA government has come out with a categorical policy on hijacking. They have said there would be no concession, no talks.

So, the media can go to town if there is another hijacking...

As it stands today, the Government of India's declared policy on hijacking is very clear. No concession to terrorists under any condition.

This means what happened in the past was a mistake.

Obviously, people learn.

We had no advance intelligence information on the hijacking of IC-814. We couldn't stop the plane in Amritsar even though it stood on the crucial minutes...

We should have been alert. IC-814 was a national intelligence failure. We should have known that the planning was being done in Nepal. They came from their bases there. Parvez Cheema, their intelligence officer, came to the airport. Things were taking place and we should have known about it.

Who is to blame?

Probably, it would be the system that would be able to decide who is to blame.

Are you saying that RAW should have had the information in Nepal?

I am not saying that. We are talking about the system.

Intelligence gathering in Nepal would necessarily be a RAW function.

(Pauses) They have got an external charter. I think the original base was in Karachi. Planning was done in Karachi. They had communication with K Bangladesh. From there, they came to India. Then they came to Bombay. They hired a place in Bombay. From there, they went to Kathmandu. A few days later, they have known why have they come. Intelligence Bureau should also have ... they were also able to rope in local accomplices. The Bombay police will also be about intelligence framework. IC-814 was a national intelligence failure. Now it is for somebody to go into the nuts and bolts.

Even that exercise was not undertaken?

After every case of failure, we must analyse why we failed.

Which we didn't? In the Kargil case, there was a committee.

The intelligence must have conducted that.

You were in Kandahar negotiating with the hijackers. What was their mood? Were they hellbent on blowing the plane?

Yes. Total. This has also been confirmed by the documents subsequently seized by the Americans from the Taliban. They were on a fidayeen mission. They were more than five percent. Right from their conduct in Amritsar itself. Nobody is thinking of living or bargaining. He will say I will get something out of it. Then they landed in Lahore airport. Go through their conduct inside the aeroplane. There was no light at the Lahore airport, as the lights had been switched off at the airport. The hijacker were pressing the pilot to fly to Dubai when there was no petrol.

Actually, they were to land on the road by mistake. There was no ATC support. Subsequently, they removed the baggage, probably they had a remote with them. A lot when they said we will give a millennium present to the government of India. During the negotiation, it was clear to me that they want to make big sacrifices. They have sacrificed themselves... They were trained. Probably, they had the same mindset as Mohammad Atta and others (who flew planes into the World Trade Center on 9/11).

In their talks with you, what were they saying?

They were saying our demands are non-negotiable and that we have come here to die. That I don't take seriously because every terrorist would say that.

So how did you figure that was their intent as well? How did you realize they were fidayeen?

I have gone through all the hijackings this country has faced. One of the main tasks of a negotiator is to read the mind (of the person) and see that what they are saying is what they mean. So they started with that. I thought that after 36 hours they would start showing a certain amount of flexibility, but there was no change in that. Their determination was constant. There was no erosion. Their determination and will was constant at a certain level.

But they reduced the number of militants from 33 to 3. But it became clear to you that Maulana Masood Azhar was extremely important to them.

Yes. He is very important. In the context of hijacking, our giving Maulana Masood Azhar was a mistake. Purely on security and intelligence consideration. It was wrong. It should not have been done. But if there was a larger political... it was for them to decide. But you are not the only last custodian of wisdom. Nobody swapped, least of all Maulana Masood Azhar.

Let's talk about Dawood. We haven't been able to get him after so many years?

We should have been able to get him. After all, he has been protected by a sovereign state.

We can get him if the victim state decides to take some initiative – military or covert – any initiative that does not involve the cooperation of another state. Somebody is sheltering him.

Why are we not planning a covert operation?

No comments.

Why don't we still have any concrete evidence of the fact that he is in Pakistan? Like a photograph, maybe?

Yes, we have. We have given the governments of Pakistan and other governments photographs of Dawood in Pakistan. Maybe his Pakistani passport. His photograph and his address... Maybe the house in which he lives. There is a photograph where he is in the lawn. Even that has been given. Maybe a newspaper clipping from Pakistan, even that has been given.

So, how can Pakistan get away?

They are a sovereign country.

What does America have to say? They are involved in a global war against terror. What do they tell us in the face of all this evidence?

They have designated him a global terrorist. They are doing everything that's to be done to deal with an internationally designated terrorist.

But nothing stops America from picking up people it wants from 'sovereign' nations. They have done that in Pakistan?

Certainly, if Dawood Ibrahim was Osama bin Laden, then, probably, with the same evidence, much more would have happened. That's the reality. That's how it played in the international community.

Are we not playing that game well? Or are they not listening to us?

Pressure has been there on Pakistan, but it has still not responded. Successive governments have been putting a lot of pressure. The NDA government gave them. Their addresses and details were given. The material about their involvement in India was given. They have built up a huge impact over there. They have interests there. They have bought ships and shopping plazas there.

So we have the proof, but we don't have Dawood?.

That's what I said. Knowledge doesn't mean that it will be acted upon.

So America is not pushing the envelope because it needs Pakistani support right now?

America is willing to push Pakistan up to a point. But not to the point where it meets our requirement. The obstinacy of Pakistan is so high, the advantage of high that they would probably not give him easily.

Has Dawood not become a liability for Pakistan?

He is a liability as well as an asset. On balance of consideration, he is more of an asset. The advantages are more than the costs involved.

What are the advantages of keeping him? Why would Pakistan want to shelter a global terrorist?

For any covert action that they may have to carry out, not only against India but globally, he (Dawood) is a person who has got terrorists with money and underworld contacts, who has got contacts with gunrunners, who can leverage the counterfeiter's position, position the people, position the assets. Take the Kandahar up in Bombay. Why did they come to Bombay? Because they wanted the Indian driving licence so that they can travel around. It is delivered in their house, in. Because Dawood can get it done.

So Dawood helped them?

Yes. So there are a large number of people who come on subversive missions, on sabotage missions. The devil lies in the detail. Who can give you the give you the micro level? Who can send you a taxi to pick you up from the airport, take you from the airport where you are safe, get you a document you require, hire you are arrested, bribe somebody and get you released? Now that covert capability puts ISI in an advantageous position.

To what extent can he still run his underworld apparatus in Mumbai? Is he in control?

As far as the apparatus is concerned, he is still very much in control.

But the underworld war seems to be on the decline...

The pressure on him is on the decline. It's a world of its own where there are ups and down. Maybe, Dawood realises that he may like to come back to India thinking that things may change in Pakistan and globally. He would also like a certain amount of ...

Has he sent such feelers?

I am not aware of it but I am aware of how their minds work. They would like to have a certain amount of stability.

He will have to spend the rest of his life in jail. Would he be willing to do that?

I don't know. It depends how many cases are against him. After all, when the Bombay blasts happened, he was not here physically. So it's a matter of justice against him. The best course for him would be to come to India. After all, how far and how long is he going to run? And even if he is never caught, his entire Indian system is very liberal. Judiciary is very independent. He can get the best of the lawyers. Be a good Indian citizen. He may also not be happy at being for himself, his family.

It is part of the charter of intelligence agency to try and get a man like Dawood even if it means using a rival like Chhota Rajan. To what strategy succeeded. How close has that reached?

No comments at all. I don't discuss operations.

Lastly, the terrorists are not on the run not to the required degree. Why is the Indian State lacking?

The security apparatus must be preventing more 90 percent of their intended (targets). What they intend: they would like to take over VIPs, they would like to economic installations, disrupt our communication, blow up our bridges. They would like to do everything possible when it comes to bleed India. Even if it's improved. There is always a room for improvement. Because there is no reward for runners-up in this game of terrorists. Either you are a winner or a loser categories. There is no silver medal, there is only gold medal. So if we have prevented 50 and one has happened, we have to prevent that also.

Right now, to use your analogy, we are in the loser category...

Incidents are happening. They must be prevented. The people must be working 18 hours a day. Everyone right from the prime minister down the line must and I know they are giving their best.

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