

## Bangladesh siege continues into 3<sup>rd</sup> day



**Phill Hynes, ISS Risk, 26 March, 2017:** There has been a siege going on since early hours of Friday morning in the North east of the country just below the Indian state of Assam. Police acting alone initially cordoned off an apartment block in Shibbari area under south Surma sub-district of Sylhet district, cornering an unknown number of militants. Police believe the latest leader of Neo-JMB - Maynul Islam Musa - is holed up inside the apartment. They came under sustained fire and IED attack almost immediately.

The militants had blocked the entrance to the apartment block and booby trapped it, keeping the residents as defacto hostages. The police, by now joined by military commando forces, launched a major assault Saturday afternoon after about 28 hours into the standoff, however, during the assault, aside from meeting stiff resistance from the militants in the apartment, they were essentially counter attacked on the perimeter of the siege by at least one suicide bomb and a secondary device deployed in a bag of vegetables placed amongst the crowd of onlookers, a mere few hundred metres from an active terrorist incident. Six people were killed, two of them police officers, and 40 injured. Thankfully common sense and proper training are now prevailing after sadly 6 people had to die and the cordon has been moved to a perimeter of 2kms now.

During the course of the day the trapped families were gradually released and rescued.

However, the militants have planted IED's throughout the building in anticipation of the eventual security clearance operation. The situation at time of writing is ongoing and fluid.

What is also interesting is that on Friday evening there was also a suicide bombing at a police checkpoint near Dhaka airport, the second such incident this past week in the area around the airport. There has been an unambiguous increase in militant activity in Bangladesh as we have covered in depth over the past few weeks, indicative of an upward threat trajectory. What more proof is required of the escalating situation baffles and defies description frankly. The BBC finally decided to get in on the action and first reported on the incident 3 hrs ago, around 3am Sunday morning, two whole days into the incident. Bangladesh is a long way away from the Western world, no doubt, but the events unfolding in this distant country should be concerning even to distant observers.

The BBC reported the following: ([Full story](#))

***Six people - two police officers and four civilians - have been killed in twin bombings in north-eastern Bangladesh, officials say.***

***The blasts in Sylhet occurred near an apartment building where commandoes have been trying to flush out a group of suspected Islamist militants.***

***Earlier many civilians were evacuated from the block of flats. The suspects have refused to surrender.***

***Dozens of people were injured in the twin explosions on Saturday.***

***The blasts hit a large crowd which had gathered nearby as troops continued to exchange gunfire with the militants.***

***The first explosive device was brought by two men on a motorbike and the second was left in a bag of vegetables, police say.***

***So-called Islamic State (IS) claimed on messaging app Telegram that it was behind one of the blasts.***

***A violent resurgence - Analysis by Anbarasan Ethirajan, BBC South Asia Analyst***

***The escalation in violence comes at a time when many in Bangladesh thought security forces had managed to curb Islamist militancy, following the deadly siege on***

*a café in Dhaka last year.*

*Since then security personnel have carried out a number of raids, arresting and sometimes killing dozens of suspected Islamists across the country.*

*But the recent suicide attacks on security camps and checkpoints have surprised many.*

*Despite claims by the Islamic State group and al-Qaeda, Bangladeshi police maintain that an offshoot of the banned Islamist outfit Jamaeytul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) is responsible for many of these attacks.*

*The challenge for the security forces is to find out how many more followers or hard line jihadist sympathisers are still in hiding.*

*If it is proved that Islamist extremists are responsible for the recent handful of suicide bombings, then it marks a new phase in Bangladesh's fight against militancy.*

The Sylhet siege was instigated on intelligence gleaned from arrested militants in Chittagong over the past few weeks, (a surprisingly active area for observers no doubt, with dozens of incidents throughout the month!). Contrary to expert opinion of the BBC South Asia analyst, the increase in terrorist activity has been sadly, very predictable. The assertion that the situation had been brought under control since the cafe attack is a fallacy. The requirement to state that *"if it is proved that Islamist extremists are responsible for the recent handful of suicide bombings, then it marks a new phase in Bangladesh's fight against militancy"* is symptomatic of the sit on the fence approach to this problem that permeates the government stance on the growing risk. To imply that it is not yet 'PROVEN' this is Islamic militants is pithy. To suggest in a demeaning tone that the "handful of suicide bombings" is somehow insignificant needs challenging. What in this experts' opinion constitutes a tangible and real indication of increased threat and risk? Perhaps another Holy Artisan Cafe style attack one imagines. An all too common approach to evaluation of the threat and risk, retrospective two pence worth!

There has indisputably been a wave of terrorist incidents and security force responses across the nation in the past 9 months. Here are but a few examples of coverage of this rising threat:

- Special Report: Bangladesh Terrorism Review – March, 2017 ([Full report](#))

- Special Report: The Emergence and Growth of ISIS in Bangladesh: How the JMB acted as the conduit for the establishment of ISIS in the South Asian nation – September 2016 ([Full report](#))
- Special Report: Growth of Militancy and ISIS in Bangladesh – June 2016 ([Full report](#))

The list could go on, this not an exercise in self-promotion, it is to demonstrate that the history of this escalation has been tracked and mapped since 2015 and pithy assertions countering the evidence are unacceptable.

The recent incidents, events, raids and detentions are merely supportive evidence of the emergent trends. The pattern of activity has been blatantly obvious to be seen. The problem is now spreading; the displacement of terrorists across the country in response to the security operations against the militants from different organisations has resulted in yet further embedding the network nationwide. This is an observation, not a criticism. The extent of the spread is evidenced through recent reports from the Indian intelligence services that upwards of 2000 Bangladeshi militants had crossed into West Bengal and into Assam among other parts of India in 2016. That may be an indirect indicator of the scale of the domestic network in Bangladesh and a salient pointer to the coming problems and threat of further escalation not just in Bangladesh, but regionally. These recent incidents do not indicate Bangladesh is in a "New phase" or at a turning point in its fight against militancy, that has been the case since 2014.