

Anthrax Threat in Pakistan, Global Context and Regional Consequences

Ms. Gunjan Singh

The author is a Researcher at IDSA, New Delhi.

Summary

Reports of Anthrax threat to Pakistani officials raises important questions regarding its spread in South Asia. It also exposes Pakistan's vulnerabilities to bioterrorism and calls for urgent attention at appropriate levels.

Anthrax has come into focus yet again with a letter received by a high profile office. According to media reports, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani received a postal package containing anthrax spores in February 2012. While this incidence is confirmed by various sources, its exact date remains unclear as there are a number of contradicting reports with respect to the time when this happened. Some media reports claim that this incident happened about four months ago while others have been stating that this happened over a year ago. As reported by the New York Times, "The package was intercepted by the prime minister's security staff in October, according to the spokesman, Akram Shaheedi. The Pakistan Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, a government laboratory, established that the suspicious white powder it contained was anthrax spores, he said".¹ A criminal case was also reported to be filed and it was announced that this package was sent by a professor, Ms. Zulekha, of the Jamshoro University.²

Anthrax had become an important security threat in 2001 in the aftermath of 9/11. Reports show that letters containing Anthrax were sent to various people and resulted in five deaths and seventeen were reported sick.³ It is also generally believed that these attacks were carried out by some American scientists.⁴ There were similar attempts in India as well when the then Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Mr. Chhagan Bhujbal, received an envelope containing some white powder. It was later confirmed that the envelope contained Anthrax.⁵

There seems to be a pattern to these events as anthrax has been used as a major tool of distraction rather than as a Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD). However in the past,

there have been reports which suggest that Anthrax has been one of the favoured weapons of Al Qaeda. There are reports which suggest that it had gained Anthrax as early as 1997.⁶

Another important question which arises after this is whether biological weapons have become the tool of choice for the disgruntled and discontent sections of the society. There is also a pattern whereby terrorist organisations and disgruntled individuals learn from each other as far as weapon usage is concerned. This is more prominent in the case of biological and chemical weapons. In the case of Anthrax one sees that more and more disgruntled people are using it. The first such case was when discontent scientists used it in the United States in 2001.⁷

After that in 2011 Anders Behring Breivik had also stated that he regarded Anthrax as '*one of the most effective weapons*'. Therefore, the potential are non-state actor users of anthrax, who see its utility for violent purposes, need not be terrorist organisations as such as such instances indicate. On the other hand, they could belong to any sections of the society reacting to any trigger causing disturbance. Thus, monitoring such individual actors becomes that much more difficult than observing an organised group.

The event appears to be more disturbing as Pakistan has always been considered a fertile ground for terrorism breeding. In the last two years there has been a steady increase in the number of terrorist activities inside Pakistan. What is surprising is that the Pakistani security establishment took almost four months to establish and acknowledge this fact. Delay in releasing these reports highlights the fact that the Pakistani government and security establishment are not fully equipped with detection and prevention techniques. This also raises questions about

Pakistan's capability to handle a full scale disaster arising out of biological attack. On the other hand in case of India, during the Mayapuri nuclear radiation case, government had proper institutions and process in order to handle the situation. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) had successfully managed to control the situation and clear the affected area. The second issue which needs attention is the degree of Pakistani investment in the area of biological agents/weapons protection and safety in case of a disaster. It is always been in the domain of argument as to how strong is the Pakistani state's capability to prevent an accident/incident from spiraling out of control. This incident becomes even more worrying when seen in the light of other recent anthrax attacks reported in the last six months in neighbouring Afghanistan. Pakistan's weak institutional structures would stand even more exposed if these attacks were related to each other in any ways at all.

These developments show that the Pakistani terrorist organisations can get access to biological weapons. There is a need to understand and study the possibility of the outcome of such a scenario. As has been argued by Animesh Raul, "More than state actors, biological weapons are most dangerous when acquired, developed or used by non-state actors like terrorists, religious cults, and Mafia syndicates".⁸

Endnotes:

- ¹ "Pakistan Says Prime Minister Was Mailed Anthrax Spores" By Salman Masood, The New York Times, February 1, 2012 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/world/asia/pakistan-reveals-prime-minister-gilani-was-sent-anthrax.html> accessed on February 8, 2012
- ² Ibid.
- ³ "Amerithrax or Anthrax Investigation" at <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/history/>

famous-cases/anthrax-amerithrax/
amerithrax-investigation accessed on February
14, 2012

- ⁴ “2001 Anthrax attack on US Congress made by scientists and covered up by FBI, expert says” by Sherwood Ross, Global Research, December 12, 2006 at <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=4129> accessed on February 14, 2012
- ⁵ “Letter to Bhujbal ‘anthrax positive’” The Hindu, November 3, 2001 at <http://www.hindu.com/2001/11/03/stories/01030007.htm> accessed on February 14, 2012
- ⁶ “Al Qaeda, Anthrax and Ayman: means, opportunities, motive, and modus operandi” Copyright 2002 Ross E. Getman, Esq., November 20, 2002 at <http://cryptome.org/alqaeda-anthrax.htm> accessed on February 16, 2012
- ⁸ “Bioterrorism and the BTWC” by Animesh Roul, February 8, 2011 at <http://www.bwpp.org/revcon-bioterrorism.html> accessed on February 16, 2012