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The Saudi Press Agency reported on June 18, 2002, the arrests of 11 Saudis, an Iraqi and a Sudanese. All of them were described as belonging to Al Qaeda. The Sudanese was reported to have told the authorities that he had fired a surface-to-air missile at a U.S. military plane taking off from a Saudi air base. The agency said the arrested persons were targeting a number of "vital" installations and were planning to use explosives and surface-to-air missiles.

2. In Washington DC, an unnamed U.S. official identified the Sudanese man as Abu Huzifa, who was suspected as an Al Qaeda cell leader and who reportedly acknowledged shooting a shoulder-fired SA-7 surface-to-air missile at an American plane taking off from the Prince Sultan Air Base. A simultaneous announcement by the Sudanese Government stated that it had transferred the man to Saudi Arabia after he admitted firing a missile at a plane at the air base. In May, 2002, Saudi security guards were reported to have found a missile-launcher tube about two miles from a runway at the desert base, south of the Saudi capital of Riyadh. The Agence France-Presse (AFP), quoting a Saudi dissident, said dozens, if not hundreds, of Saudis linked to Al Qaeda were in detention in the kingdom and that in one of the cases, "between six and 15 people," all Saudis, were arrested four months ago on suspicion of smuggling shoulder-held missiles from Yemen.

3. Subsequently, a Western news agency reported on November 7, 2002, that two Pakistanis and an Indian-born American Muslim, who allegedly used Hong Kong as a venue to negotiate the purchase of four Stinger missiles for Al Qaeda, had been arrested in Hong Kong following a sting operation by agents of the USA's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

4. In the wake of these reports has come the abortive attempt by some terrorists, as yet unidentified but suspected to be from either Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda or one of the components of his International Islamic Front (IIF), to bring down, with the help of two missiles fired from the ground, an Israeli chartered plane, carrying Israeli tourists, as it was taking off from the Mombasa airport in Kenya on November 28,

2002. The plane and its passengers had a lucky escape. An abandoned shoulder-fired missile-launcher has been recovered by the Kenyan Police from a nearby field. It was apparently not a heat-seeking missile as, otherwise, the plane might not have escaped.

5. In the past, there had been instances of insurgent groups such as the Vietcong in Vietnam and those of Myanmar damaging or bringing down aircraft/helicopters with fire directed from the ground through conventional anti-aircraft weapons or even rifles which can be effective against low-flying aircraft/helicopters. During the Afghan war of the 1980s, the Afghan Mujahideen used with devastating effect US-supplied Stinger missiles against Soviet aircraft and gunship helicopters.

6. The Stinger is a shoulder-fired, heat-seeking missile. All that is required is to keep the launcher on the shoulder, turn it in the direction of the aircraft and fire. The missile chases the heat exhaust of the plane and brings it down. After suffering many losses, the Soviets found an effective evasive technique by firing a number of flares while taking off and landing and on sighting a missile-firing while in flight. The idea was that the missile would chase one of the flares thereby enabling the plane to escape.

7. After the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1988, the USA's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) mounted a special drive to buy back from the Mujahideen the unused Stingers to prevent the possibility of their being used for committing acts of terrorism and their sale to US adversaries such as Iran and Iraq. Despite large amounts offered by the CIA, the Mujahideen were not prepared to sell them back to the US. The drive was, therefore, a flop.

8. The US authorities reassured countries such as India, which were worried over the possibility of these missiles getting into the hands of Pakistan-based terrorist groups, that once the life-period of the batteries of the launchers expired within two years, the holders of these missiles would find it difficult to get replacement batteries, without which they would not be able to use the launchers.

9. After the fall of the Najibullah Government in Kabul in April, 1992, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) rushed a team of officers to Kabul to take possession of all the unused missiles in the custody of the Afghan Army, including the Stinger missiles seized by the Army from the Mujahideen. It is not known how many missiles and their launchers were recovered by the ISI and what happened to them.

10. Amongst terrorist organisations, the Chechens of Russia and the LTTE of Sri Lanka had demonstrated a capability for bringing down aircraft/helicopters. In the case of the Chechens, the Russian authorities had claimed that the terrorists had used missiles. It was not known wherefrom they got these missiles. In the case of the LTTE, there was speculation in Sri Lanka that it had used a shoulder-fired missile. In 1995, the LTTE was reported to have helped the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HUM) of Pakistan, which is now one of the members of bin Laden's IIF, in smuggling by sea a consignment of arms and ammunition, including anti-aircraft weapons and shoulder-fired missiles, to the Abu Sayyaf of Southern Philippines. In return, the HUM was reported to have given the LTTE some missiles and their launchers.

11. The fear of such missiles being used for attacking aircraft carrying Very Important Persons (VIPs) has been a matter of great concern to the intelligence and security agencies of many countries, including India, and the drill for the protection of VIPs has taken note of this threat and laid down evasive techniques.

12. In the past, terrorists having an anti-aircraft capability had used that capability mainly against military aircraft and had refrained from using it against civil aircraft. The attempted use of shoulder-fired missiles against the Israeli civil aircraft at Mombasa on November 28, 2002, shows the ruthlessness of Al Qaeda and its allies in the IIF as terrorist organisations. The Bali explosion of October in Indonesia against foreign tourists frequenting night clubs and the terrorist strikes of Mombasa have to be seen in the context of bin Laden's threat in his broadcast (through Al Jazeera) message of November 12, 2002, to damage the Western economy.

13. These strikes were not directed at the economies of Indonesia or Kenya. These were directed at the global economy. By targeting foreign travellers and civil aircraft, bin Laden's organisations, whether Al Qaeda or the IIF, are trying to create a fear of travel and feelings of insecurity in the emerging markets of the world, which have been the destination of the increased flow of foreign investments since the 1990s. Nothing deters a businessman or an investor more than fears of physical insecurity. By creating such fears, he has been seeking to damage the business links of these countries with the West, particularly the USA, in the hope that this would ultimately damage the economies of the West.

14. Without the modern means of rapid travel and communications, there would have been and there would be no globalisation. The organisations inspired by bin Laden have already targeted the travel industry and the means of transport. It is only a question of time before they target the means of communications such as the Internet. To achieve their objective, they are prepared to kill any number of innocent civilians, even if they be innocent Muslims.

15. While Bali could have been the result of an independent initiative of the indigenous terrorist elements inspired by bin Laden without any central direction from outside, the Mombasa strikes indicate the possibility of central thinking, direction and co-ordination. It is difficult to accept that they too, like Bali, were the outcome of local initiative, undirected from a central command and control.

16. How is the international community going to deal with this ruthless terrorism, the like of which the world has not seen before? This terrorism threatens India, Israel and the US more than any other country. India and Israel have accumulated years of experience in dealing with terrorism. The US has the material and technical resources. The three should join hands together for eliminating these terrorists with total ruthlessness. No other group of countries can do it as effectively as these three can, if only they co-operate silently, intelligently and with cool determination.

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