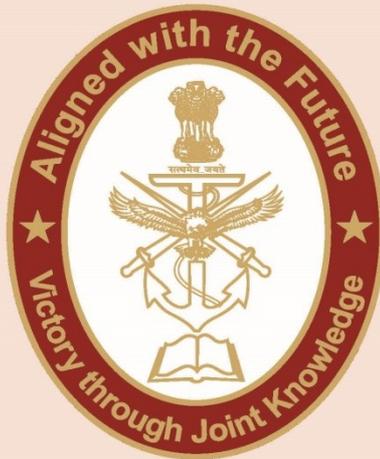


CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



CENJOWS

MISSING OPPORTUNITIES IN KASHMIR

BY

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1. Recently twelve-year-old Atif Mir and his uncle were held hostage by two militants who had been trapped inside a house in North Kashmir's Hajin town. He was killed by militants before security forces blew up the building eliminating them, while his uncle managed to escape. His uncle, Abdul Hameed Mir, was fired upon by militants as he ran but made it safely. Security forces had cordoned the house based on confirmed intelligence on the presence of militants in the locality.
2. As per press reports including an interview with close family of Atif, portrayed on TV, it emerged that one of the militants, Ali, a member of the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and a Pakistani national had been insisting on marrying the sister of Atif. His parents were unwilling and had even moved the girl away from the city. In an earlier incident, as per press reports, the same militants had beaten up the family members for refusing to agree to the marriage.
3. Hence, in anger they refused to release the child. Pleas by the mother of Atif and other influential members of the city had no impact.

Normally, militants have allowed safe passage to civilians, however refused this time. Security forces waited for 10 hours for the militants to release the child, after which they took the decision to act. Both the militants were listed militants, who had on occasions escaped security forces dragnet thus had to be eliminated. They had also been responsible for beheading people in the same city whom they considered police informers, hence were also feared.

4. Criticism for this brutal act by militants flowed from all quarters. As usual protests from the separatists and valley based political leaders were subdued and mild. This has angered some segments of the Kashmiri society. Mehbooba Mufti, who has been known to visit families of slain militants, never bothered to visit the house of Atif and join the family in grieving. There were no calls for bandhs against this dastardly action by the militants. Despite this lack of criticism of militant actions, thousands attended the funeral of Atif.

5. On social media Kashmiri's began claiming that the child died when the house was blown to eliminate the militants. There is also a video circulating of a house being blown by security forces. Details of whether it is of an earlier incident or the present, remains unknown, however continues circulating. Kashmiri's have also sought to defend the militants by comparing their action to that of Major Gogoi, who took a stone thrower hostage by tying him to his jeep. What has been missed is that Major Gogoi acted to save lives, whereas militants acted in vengeance against the refusal of marriage.

6. Most Kashmiri sympathisers have also been projecting that security forces should have called off the operation, since a child was being held hostage. In their opinion, saving the child was more important than eliminating militants. Claims by family members that he was killed earlier have had few takers. Since the bodies were charred post the army operation, the truth may not easily emerge.

7. This scenario has risen because no government agency or local press has projected the true picture and patience which security forces displayed. Neither has the video of a building being blown up been refuted as false. The reality which was vastly different should have been highlighted across all forms of media.

8. Firstly, leaving the operation because of a hostage crisis would provide militants the easiest lee way in the future. Locals would either be made hostages by compulsion or over ground workers would become

willing hostages to enable escape of militants. This would only enhance problems for security forces. Experience from earlier hostage crisis has also been painful. Such a trend cannot be permitted to happen.

9. Secondly, the population of Hajin had been suffering brutal treatment at the hands of these militants, including beheadings and manhandling. Hence, criticism for the security forces conduct of the operation flowed from other regions of the valley, whose population remained unaware of the trauma locals faced in Hajin. This aspect should have been highlighted in local media.

10. Thirdly, security forces attempted every means to get the militants to release the child. Family members of Atif and local religious leaders made repeated requests which the militants refused to heed. Thus, it was evident that they would not relent. Further, having murdered the child, there was no way they could be permitted to escape. Post attempting for ten hours, the security forces acted. Videos of the appeals made were visible on social media, while locals criticizing the militants for not releasing the child were missing.

11. This incident, if correctly handled by the state, security forces and local elders, could have been exploited to enhance anger against militants who target innocent civilians. Since targeting of innocents is on the rise, it could turn tables. Since these militants were foreign national's anger against Pak infiltrated militants should have been exploited. A visit to the family to offer condolences by security force personnel, local administration and police projected in local media would also have had a positive impact.

12. The negative role of local politicians and the separatists should have been exploited. The fact that they refused to call a bandh and failed to offer condolences implied they supported the killing of a child by Pak infiltrated militants. Their being Pak supporters should have been projected through local media.

13. However, very limited exploitation was done, which had very limited impact. The anger which existed in the local population was not channelized in the right direction. This has resulted in a different narrative being played out and the blame being shifted onto security forces. An opportunity based on facts has been missed once again. The government and security forces have, despite taking every positive step, become villains in the case. Security agencies must project the

truth as early as possible, stop spread of rumours and gain the upper hand in the battle of minds, being played out on social media.

Disclaimer:- Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.