

Hoax bomb threat calls and their implications

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Incidents of hoax bomb threat calls

- Last few weeks, more than 510 domestic and international flights received bomb threats that later turned out to be hoaxes.
- Blast outside CRP school in New Delhi and hoax calls of similar attacks on schools run by CRP at other places
- Hoax bomb threat calls against five star hotels
- These hoax bomb threat calls are likely to continue against soft targets at the airports, aircrafts, air lines offices and may other places in the days to come

Main Forces behind hoax bomb threat calls

- Khalistani terrorist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, residing at New York City, and dual citizen of USA and Canada stated on Oct 31, 2024 that the intention behind these hoax bomb threat calls is ‘to destroy Indian economy’. It is a deliberate attempt to destabilize India’s economy by disrupting the aviation sector’s contribution to the country’s financial growth
- Pannun had earlier given a call to boycott flying on airlines operated by Indian agencies from Nov 1 to 19
- Pannun demanded ‘shutdown’ of CRPF schools from Nov 26.
- US & Canada need to verify such persons, and take stern action against Pannun and persons of his clan for disturbing social order

Likely motives behind hoax bomb threat calls

- In three separate incidents three persons have been detected and arrested from different places including Rajnandgaon, Chhattisgarh, Delhi and Nagpur: They admitted these calls were made for revenge against a friend or gain fame.
- Motives include malicious intents, attention-seeking, mental health issues, and pranks
- Details of one such prank detected by Nagpur police are as follows:
<https://www.nagpurtoday.in/how-nagpur-police-traced-and-arrested-suspect-behind-nationwide-bomb-threats-reveals-cp-nagpur/11021740>

Sources of these hoax bomb threat calls

- There is emerging trend of issuing hoax bomb threat calls through various social media platforms. Threats were received via emails (mostly from outside the country), social media like X, Meta, WhatsApp, Instagram and anonymous calling methods like Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) to avoid detection.
- Determining the IP addresses(for emails) has been difficult, due to use of camouflage technologies.
- The social media perpetrators could not be tracked, as the service providers of X, Meta, and WhatsApp either refuse to divulge the sources or delay insisting on valid legal orders
- This adds to the suspicion of planned conspiracy.

Cost of hoax bomb threat calls

- Appreciable number of hoax bomb threat calls were received mid-flight.
- A mid-flight threat leads to immediate diversion, to the nearest airport, which many a times may be far from the intended destination.
- Sudden rerouting of flights (post receiving a mid-flight threat) comes with a hefty operational cost, involving scrambling of fighter jets to escort threatened flights, extensive checks on baggage, cargo and additional catering.
- Time delays runs into hours, necessitating crew replacement, additional maintenance, facilities for commuters' comforts. Total cost adds up to minimum Rupees 3 crores per such flight.

Pattern in these hoax bomb threat calls

- Single threat was initially given using social media platform or through a phone call, resulting in sudden appearance of similar threats, within a short span of time, revealing well planned and coordinated actions.
- Hoax bomb threat calls were intended to disturb the aviation sector, create panic and keep all relevant agencies on their toes.

Penal Provisions against hoax bomb threat calls

- Primary laws that deal with such mischievous pranks include various sections of Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita (2023) (Jail from 6 months -7 years), in more serious cases, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) (life imprisonment and substantial fines), Disaster Management Act, 2005 (imprisonment for up to 1 year or a fine).
- Legislation is also under consideration for amending suppression of Unlawful Acts Against Safety of Civil Aviation Act, 1982 and mulls five years imprisonment and placing the perpetrator in the no-fly list

New norms to check hoax bomb threats

- Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS) has Bomb Threat Assessment Committee (BTAC) to analyse a bomb or security threat against an airline, airport or any part of the aviation ecosystem that decides to declare it “specific” or serious or “non-specific” or hoax.
(<https://m.economictimes.com/industry/transportation/airlines-/-aviation/geopolitical-analysis-vip-onboard-among-criteria-in-new-norms-to-check-hoax-bomb-threats-to-flights/articleshow/114777533.cms>)
- On Oct 19, 2024 BCAS has issued new guidelines adopting ‘multi-layered’ approach to assess threats and determine the ‘credibility and seriousness’ of such threats issued on social media and satisfy themselves about the ‘credibility’ of the source of information.

New protocol to be adopted by BTAC

- Committee will establish identity of the person or organisation making the threat, check their credentials, to see if they belong to a terrorist or proscribed outfit, ascertain the motive, and specific socio-economic, and political situation within the country or around the globe that could be linked to the threat.
- It will gauge if the targeted flight has a VIP or VVIP onboard if the social media handle from which the threat has been made is verified, if the account or handle is pseudonymous and if the same handle was used to issue multiple threats.

Outcome of the new protocol

- These new guidelines have been set into motion and this has led to the declaration of bomb threats to more than 400 flights as a hoax.
- This has saved a lot of trouble for passengers, airlines, airports and security agencies
- As per the analysis, one social media(handle) issued multiple threats and had specific flight numbers.
- The cyber wings of some of the intelligence and probe agencies are now working along with the BTAC too.

Responsibility of the social media

- Social media including X and WhatsApp need to remove such threats before these appear on platforms. In case these appear, information about the source of these handles need to be shared with BCAS immediately.
- Persons making these reckless threats need to be barred from further participation and their accounts need to be blocked.

Precautions by other soft targets

- Schools and other soft targets need to undertake similar precautions issued by concerned agencies .
- School authorities should also take parents into confidence and inform them about the protocol being followed, so that parents don't get panicky.
- Other establishments including hotels should increase patrolling around their premises and enforce access control strictly for personnel and metal detectors to check the baggage. They should also consider deploying canine squads for sniffing persons and baggage for detecting explosives.

References to my articles and other links

- <https://www.thepperfectvoice.in/post/global-action-needed-to-address-airlines-hoax-calls>
- <https://www.thepperfectvoice.in/post/essential-tips-to-stay-safe-online>
- <https://www.newsonair.gov.in/govt-asks-all-social-media-intermediaries-to-remove-all-bomb-hoax-content-cooperate-with-probe-agencies/>
- <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/remove-hoax-bomb-threats-report-to-authorities-meity-to-social-media-companies-101729928933151.html>