


Why we must reassess emergency response in the wake of the Delhi school bomb hoax

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On the morning of May 1, 2024, more than 100 schools in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) received bomb threats over email. The emails were received by the schools around 4 AM, leading to the evacuation and closure of schools later in the day. It first led to panic and then chaos among students, teachers and parents.

PREMIUM

New Delhi, - May 1, 2024: Air Force Bal Bharati school Lodi Road evacuate in view of Bomb Hoax mail in the morning in New Delhi, , on Wednesday, May 1, 2024. (Photo by Arvind Yadav/ Hindustan Times)(Hindustan Times)

In a few schools, students were moved out of buildings and had to wait for hours in a common area on the premises before leaving for their homes. The children were asked to leave their school bags and other belongings in school to be collected the next day.

While Delhi's education minister Atishi and the Delhi police confirmed the news on social media, bomb squads and police teams investigated the schools and increased security throughout the Capital. According to police, "nothing suspicious was found," and the event was labelled a hoax. Police filed an FIR against an unknown person under section 120B, 506 of IPC.

Less than a week later, on Monday, May 6, several schools in Ahmedabad also received similar threats over email. These threats also appeared to be a hoax.

These kinds of "hoax" threats were not the first and certainly will not be the last to be issued. Of course, what stood out about the incident, in the case of NCR, was its scale, with several schools all across Delhi and its neighbourhood getting affected.

By using the term "hoax", it could seem that the authorities are taking the incident lightly. The jury, of course, is still out to pinpoint the accountability.

However, it does not portend well for us if a terror outfit is involved. If terrorists had a hand — which cannot be denied — they have achieved their aim of spreading panic that manifested in the large-scale evacuation of schools. One prime motive of a terror outfit is strategic messaging, and the same was achieved on May 1.

It is a given that such incidents do not have more than 24 hours of shelf life in the news narrative, which is a travesty to our sense of societal priorities.

The May 1 incident should not be taken lightly owing to the serious repercussions it could have on young minds. Point to be noted: The children who underwent evacuation could be thinking about and discussing the incident with their peers for long.

Brushing off the event as a "hoax" points to the fact that the matter is likely to be forgotten soon. Hopefully, this will not be the case and the matters will be brought to a conclusion, notwithstanding the fast-paced events around us.

However, a critical issue that seems to have escaped the post-hoax narrative is that children were issued threats in schools. Schools are the foundation of the citizenry in a society where future citizens are being groomed.

A threat of a potential terror attack will impact young minds though the impact could be different for different children. This may mould some into conscious and alert citizens while in some others, it may trigger a trauma.

Parents and teachers need to shape the former and guard against the latter.

Much depends on how such harrowing incidents are explained to school children, especially those who have experienced the panic and chaos. It doesn't augur well if children are made conscious of looming terror threats with stereotypes. An impression formed and inferences drawn at this stage are likely to stick with them for the rest of their lives. It is necessary that parents and teachers are adequately conscious of their critical responsibility, and are discrete while sharing information on such incidents with school children. Children will be inquisitive: Share information, not inferences.

Both central and state governments should look into the history of such cases and form a unified approach and response protocols to such incidents. The electronics and information technology ministries and the National Disaster Management Authority, for one, should be part of the mix when the government sits down to formulate policies to handle such cases in the future.

The May 1 bomb hoax threats are unlikely to be the last. And, that's the reason why we need to evolve policies on how to tackle such threats and their aftermaths

A broad-brush measure like large-scale evacuations could be a part of the process but they are certainly not the correct response. It was fortunate that the emailed threats did not, in reality, become a tragedy. However, a competent and effective dispensation is expected to be more focused and surer of the measures that it undertakes, irrespective of the unpredictability factor tagged to such an exigency.

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- Schools
- Delhi
- Ncr