

Questions arise about the stagnation of counter-terrorism unit

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Online Desk : 10 years of Holey Artisan attack. It was Friday on July 1, 2016, as daylight faded, the Holey Artisan Bakery on Road-79 in the capital's Gulshan-2 became the scene of one of the darkest chapters in Bangladesh's history. Around 8:45PM, heavily armed militants stormed the restaurant, triggering a deadly siege that shocked the nation and drew international attention. The attack claimed the lives of 20 innocent people, marking the deadliest terrorist assault in the country's history. Nearly a decade later, the horrific memories of that night remain deeply etched in the nation's collective consciousness.

As Bangladesh commemorates the tragedy, fresh concerns are emerging over whether militant activity is once again gaining ground, raising questions about the country's evolving security landscape. Today marks the 10th anniversary of that horrific attack. Yet, despite the passage of time, the terror of that night, the grief of families who lost loved ones, and the brutal killings targeting both Bangladeshi and foreign nationals remain unforgettable. The victims included nine Italians, seven Japanese, one Indian, two Bangladeshis and one Bangladeshi-American. Two police officers were also killed while trying to stop the assailants. The five attackers, identified as members of the neo-JMB militant group, were killed in a commando operation that ended the night-long standoff. The slain Bangladeshis were Faraaz Hossain, Abinta Kabir and Ishrat Akhond. A young Indian woman, Tarishi Jain, was also killed. The seven Japanese nationals who lost their lives were engaged in development cooperation projects in Bangladesh. Investigations revealed that five young men were selected to carry out the attack. Several of them belonged to affluent, educated families in Dhaka. They had left their homes months earlier in the name of 'hijrat'. They were subsequently sheltered in various hideouts across Gaibandha, Jhenaidah, Bogura and Pabna.

According to investigating officials, the attack was orchestrated by a neo-JMB faction inspired by IS ideology. The probe later uncovered that this group had been carrying out clandestine attacks across the country for a year prior, targeting and killing Shias, Christian converts, Hindu priests and foreign nationals. Following the Holey Artisan attack, law enforcement agencies launched a massive, nationwide crackdown on this extremist group. Many of the faction's key organisers and members were killed during these operations. Following these sustained drives, law enforcement agencies claimed to have dismantled the neo-JMB network.

Effectiveness of Specialized Counterterrorism Units Under Scrutiny As Bangladesh faces renewed security concerns, the effectiveness of the country's specialized counterterrorism agencies has come under increasing scrutiny. The police's two dedicated units- the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit and the Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU)- have been criticized by security observers for what they describe as a shift away from their core mandate of combating violent extremism.

Critics argue that instead of focusing on dismantling militant networks, both units are now largely occupied with conventional law enforcement activities, including operations against drug traffickers, muggers, suspects in political cases, and other common criminal offenders.

According to data from the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP), the CTTC arrested 152 people between January 1 and May 2025. Of those, only 11 suspects were accused of having links to militant organizations. The remaining 141 individuals were arrested on charges related to narcotics trafficking, robbery, political activities, outstanding arrest warrants, and other conventional criminal offences.

A similar trend has been observed within the Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU). Although the unit reportedly arrested between 50 and 60 suspects during the same period, most were accused of conventional crimes. No major operations or high-profile crackdowns targeting militant or extremist groups have been publicly reported by the unit in recent months.

Security analysts question why the country's specialized counterterrorism agencies appear to be focused primarily on conventional crime at a time when authorities have issued warnings of potential militant attacks

on key installations and critical infrastructure.

According to officials familiar with the matter, the focus of the two units began to shift following Bangladesh's political transition in 2024. After Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus assumed state responsibilities under the interim government, officials repeatedly stated that the country's extremist landscape had changed and that some past incidents required a different interpretation than previously presented. Since then, observers say, counterterrorism operations by both the CTTC and the ATU have become less visible, with the agencies increasingly concentrating on conventional policing, particularly operations targeting drug-related crimes, street robbery, and juvenile gangs.

Unlike traditional militant networks, extremist ideologies are increasingly being spread through social media platforms, encrypted messaging applications, and the dark web. The rise of so-called 'lone wolf' actors- individuals radicalized outside formal organizational structures- has emerged as one of the most significant global security challenges.

Security experts argue that addressing this evolving threat requires more than conventional law enforcement. Alongside intelligence-led policing and counterterrorism operations, greater emphasis must be placed on education, family engagement, responsible religious leadership, and community- based initiatives to prevent radicalization before it takes root.