

CHALLENGE OF VIGILANTE GROUPS AND GUARDING RESPONSES

Introduction

Vigilantism refers to act by a group of persons that metes out extra judicial punishment to alleged lawbreakers. Vigilantism prevails when there is either limited faith in the law of the land or when a group feels that the law does not cater for its socio-political needs. Under the circumstances police are either ineffective or are constrained to take action due to patronage of vigilante groups by influential leaders or political parties. This is also seen as, “mob justice,” however a vigilante movement is organized, thus carries a name and has a leadership structure. Vigilantism is different from instant mob anger seen after a vehicle accident in India or at hospitals. There has been a perception of increase of incidents of vigilante justice in India in recent years. While violence by vigilante groups has been criticized by various political leaders, in the parliament and even the Supreme Court, continued prevalence is a cause of security concern. With likely prevalence of violent incidents attributable to vigilante groups in the near future, there is a need for examining actions by private security agencies from the point of view of effective guarding of assets.

Aim

The aim of this paper is to outline the security challenge faced from vigilante groups in India and guarding responses.

Vigilante Groups

Vigilante groups have been active in India for some time though at present there is increased visibility due to spread of activity across the span of the country with protection of the holy cow having become a very emotive issue. However in the past vigilante groups have been active for various causes such as anti-Pakistan, non-locals in Mumbai and so on. Evidently these groups want to promote social, political and economic causes however as they take law in their own hands and indulge in violence, their acts are unjustified. In the garb of promoting a cause, local issues such as land disputes, communal and caste hate are intermingled by anti-social elements which can lead to flare up of violence. Miscreants and criminals frequently use such groups for their own purpose for grabbing property and neutralizing business of rivals. Recently it has come to light that many violent actions are undertaken by these groups based on rumours circulated on social media.

Role of Private Security Agencies

The role of private security agencies (PSA) remains primarily to guard the assets that have been placed under their charge. The role of containing public violence indulged by vigilante groups is that of the police and other government security agencies, thus PSA should not get involved in such incidents except in self-defence and protection of the assets. PSA should stay away from local political issues as this is beyond the scope of the mandate and will be detrimental for effective functioning in the local areas in the long term. At the same time PSA cannot remain oblivious of the phenomenon which can disrupt law and order and result in crime and arson. Thus close watch of the local situation is necessary and any signs of violence be brought to the notice of the law enforcement agencies at the earliest.

Types of Violent Incidents

Vigilante groups in India are mostly unarmed but carry very effective non-lethal tools such as lathis, fire bombs and Molotov cocktails and in some cases even improvised bombs. In some states as Kerala and West Bengal the groups are also armed. Vigilante groups have the advantage of numbers and can also trigger mob action. Thus small incidents can spiral out of control. The type of violent incidents undertaken by vigilante groups is as follows:-

- Targeting “outsiders,” or non-locals.
- Attacks on religious, social and political institutions
- Attacks on social and political leaders.
- Lynching of personnel such as suspects for transportation of cows.
- Targeting functions of opponents.
- Inciting communal violence.
- Road Blocks, bandhs and dharnas including arson.
- Activities in support of criminal elements such as arson and loot on property and businesses.

Security Guarding Responses

As has been highlighted the role of PSA is not to directly confront the vigilantes but to ensure security and protection of assets and personnel under their charge. While the normal SOP for security guarding of assets is relevant some of the critical aspects that need consideration to prevent losses or discontinuity due to vigilant action are outlined as follows:-

- During the planning stage critical review of the local situation is necessary to identify vigilantism and presence of vigilant groups in the area.
- The causes espoused by these groups need to be studied so that the triggers for violence should be identified and guarding detachments made aware as well as cautioned against any actions which are detrimental and could incite violence.
- Similarly activities on the premises being protected which may lead to vigilant action should be brought to the notice of the management and the same curbed.
- Cultivation of sources in local areas is necessary so that early warning of an incident can be obtained and necessary pre-emptive measures taken before flare up.
- Deployment of guards, access control measures, perimeter fencing/boundary wall and so on should also cater for a possible vigilant action in the case of an extreme scenario.
- While it will not be possible to deploy large number of guards at all times or have a Quick Reaction Team in position, contingency to reinforce the location should be worked out. Early warning is of essence and rehearsals should be carried out for this purpose.

→ There will be circumstances where violence is triggered at short notice, for this effective communications with the local police is important so that there is mutual sharing of information and assistance can be called for where necessary in case of an emergency. Rehearsals to the effect be carried out in advance.

→ Guarding detachments should have the requisite degree of diversity of personnel so that there is good understanding of a developing situation in the case of a communal flare up and also acts as a safety valve.

→ Effective monitoring of the social media by encouraging guards and others to report circulation of hate messages should be undertaken.

→ Clients should be encouraged to undertake CSR initiatives so that local support remains strong which will assist guarding.

Conclusion

Increasing number of vigilante incidents in India are a matter of concern, while the issue is being addressed at the political level and by government security agencies, PSA should be prepared for any impact of the same on the assets being guarded, some measures for which have been outlined hitherto fore.