

Gang stealing passports remains untraced

By Nadeem Saeed

MULTAN, May 12: Officials of the passport offices are scared of the gang which is on the loose since 1993, looting blank copies of the green book at gunpoint from passport offices across the country.

So far none of the government agencies have been able to find any clue to the outlaws.

The first incident of 'passport dacoity' was reported in Gujrat on June 4, 1993, when some unidentified armed persons barged into the passport office building after the office hours. They tied the watchman with a rope, pasted a piece of scotch tape on his mouth, broke the heavy iron gate of the strongroom and took away 300 copies of blank passports.

The incident was followed by a dacoity of some 4,671 passports from the Kohat passport office the same year. Then a series of such incidents occurred as 1,201 green books were taken away from the Multan office in 1994 and 800 from the Abbottabad office.

In 1996, the gang again struck in Abbottabad and took away 1,900 books. Their next adventure was in the federal capital where they snatched 700 blank passports. Their third strike in 1996 was in the Bahawalpur office from where they looted 147 books.

In 1997, the gang again stormed

into the Bahawalpur office and took away 269 passports. In the same year, some 696 passports were whisked away from the Diamir deputy commissioner's office followed by a raid on the Khuzdar regional passport office from where they made off with a booty of 800 passports.

However, the modus operandi in Dera Ghazi Khan and Karachi offices was different. In 1997, a clerk of the Dera passport office made duplicate keys of the strongroom where blank passport copies were placed and stole some 400 copies on a holiday after deceiving the watchman.

In Karachi, a peon allegedly stole some 656 copies besides 1,628 endorsement stickers in 1998 from the Nazimabad office. Clerk Majeed Janbaz of the Dera office was arrested and some 200 copies were also recovered from a Malik of Romel tribal area of Bannu.

Police could not lay hands on the Malik while Janbaz was fired. The peon of Nazimabad office was also arrested later.

Despite their arrest, the country's law-enforcement agencies could not identify the culprits whose acts had badly tarnished the country's image abroad. Last week, the Egyptian ambassador to Pakistan was quoted by the Press as saying that

Pakistani passports were being used by terrorists. Explaining his country's 'strict visa policy' to traders in Karachi, he said: "We cannot compromise on our security."

Last month, the gang again struck in Muzaffarabad, Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Dera Ismail Khan offices, and reportedly made off with hundreds of blank passport copies.

How much penetration the gang has can be judged from the fact that some 509 blank passports were stolen from the regional passport office in Birmingham, United Kingdom, in 1994, which could not be recovered. Similarly, 25 blank copies were stolen in 1995 from the consulate general of Pakistan in Bradford, UK. In 1996, 50 copies were taken away from the Pakistani embassy in Prague.

The central passport office, after each incident, conveyed the serial numbers of stolen passports to the corners concerned, specially the agencies involved in flight operation on the country's international airports. However, it is astonishing that so far none of the stolen/looted passport has been intercepted by immigration officials neither at any airport nor at any border post of the country.

The serial numbers of missing passports have been stored in the

Repak system of the national flag carrier to apprehend the holders of missing passports at the time of ticketing, but to no avail.

A passport office source observed that the gang was highly influential as, some time back, it was heard that the agencies were to bust the gang, but people with access to the corridors of power intervened and rescued the culprits.

He said without the help of the immigration people the stolen passports were like waste papers. He said the passports were mostly used by the agents who sent illegal immigrants to the US and European countries, besides militants who were engaged in the Afghan war.

He said the theft of important documents like passports not only from inside the country, but from the missions abroad revealed that the gang was well-organized with international connections.

When this correspondent visited the regional passport offices of Dera Ghazi Khan and Multan, it was surprising to know that after the office time only one watchman was supposed to face the armed assailants with empty hands.

Officials of both the offices said despite several reminders and a request for increasing security at the offices, nothing had been done on this front.