

Nariman House: survivor accounts leave questions unanswered

The Los Angeles Times Posted online: Thu Dec 04 2008, 23:36 hrs

Jerusalem : As a sombre Israel buried Rabbi Gavriel Noach Holtzberg and his wife, Rivkah, on Jerusalem's Mount of Olives on Tuesday, details of the attack that killed the couple and four others have begun to emerge.

However, in the still murky accounts by the only two adult survivors of the assault on the Chabad-Lubavitch center and by Indians living nearby there is still no clear explanation of the terrorists' aim in attacking a faceless Jewish centre on an unpaved backstreet of Mumbai.

On the day of the attack, the Holtzbergs were hosting a small group in the ultra-Orthodox centre. An unarmed Indian guard sat outside as five Jewish travellers dropped in for afternoon prayers, a kosher meal at the Holtzbergs' table and a bed for the night.

Yocheved Orpaz, a 60-year-old Israeli, was en route to join her family on an Indian vacation. Rabbi Aryeh Leibish Teitelbaum, a 37-year-old American resident of Israel, and his friend Bentzion Chroman, 28, a dual US-Israeli citizen, were in India as part of their international work supervising the preparation of kosher food.

They were joined by David Bialka, a 52-year-old diamond trader and a frequent guest at the centre, on his business travels, and Norma Shvarzblat Rabinovich, a 50-year-old Mexican Jew visiting India on her way to start a new life in Israel.

Sometime after 9 pm on November 26, the centre came under attack by at least two terrorists. Rabbi Holtzberg telephoned the Israeli Consulate. "This is not a good situation," the 29-year-old told security officer Ehud Raz before the line went dead.

Upstairs, Bialka had just fallen asleep and was roused by an explosion. He squeezed through a small fifth-floor bathroom window and shimmied down water pipes, hopping from one air-conditioning unit to another until he reached the ground.

Aroused by the commotion, an angry crowd had already gathered outside the building and mistook Bialka for a militant. They attacked him. "Twice I tried to get near the building, wanting to go back in and help," he recalled. "But they put me in a cab and took me to the police."

Neighbours heard two blood-curdling screams, one from a man and the other from a woman, and gathered outside the centre. A terrorist tossed out a grenade, killing an Indian in the crowd.

By the time security officer Raz and another armed Israeli arrived, the crowd was so agitated that it chased them to the police station too. They were detained for hours.

Israelis and Indians alike say it took police long to respond. Kamaljeet Singh, who witnessed the grenade explosion, said he rushed to a police station and then to a nearby naval base, but that officers told him they had no permission from higher-ups to act.

The house was quiet the next morning, Thursday, until nanny Sandra Samuel heard Moshe's cries. Leaving her hideout in a laundry room, the 44-year-old woman ran up a flight of stairs and found the bodies of the rabbi, his

28-year-old wife and two guests. They had apparently been shot, and Moshe was crying at his parents' side, his pants drenched in blood. The terrorists were apparently on the roof.

Samuel picked up the boy and fled the building.

Also on Thursday, the Mexican hostage, Rabinovich, was ordered to place two calls to Israeli diplomats and relay a demand that Indian forces refrain from attacking the building.

That afternoon the rabbi's cellphone rang. A terrorist answered gruffly in Urdu. Rabbi Levi Shemtov was calling from Washington, trying desperately to reach his Chabad-Lubavitch colleague. The terrorist spoke no English, Shemtov said, so the rabbi found an interpreter and dialled again.

Without identifying a cause or spelling out demands, the terrorist promised to free his captives if he got what he wanted. He identified himself as Imran Babar, age 25, and said all the hostages were OK. Shemtov promised to put Babar in touch with Indian authorities. But efforts to patch an Indian police official into a subsequent call failed.

Israeli officials said there was never any negotiation with the two terrorists.

"I asked if we could hear the voice of the rabbi, or someone who was alive there," Shemtov said. "We only heard the voice of one woman screaming in English, 'Please help immediately!'"

That was the last reported sign of life from any of the hostages.

When Shemtov insisted again on speaking to Rabbi Holtzberg, he said Babar replied: "You've already asked for too much."