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Tense standoff at Nariman House

Counting the minutes at the siege of Mumbai Jewish centre

Daniel Pepper in Mumbai
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They came by sea, on a small skiff, and made their way in the dark through the narrow streets of old Colaba to the six-storey apartment building called Nariman House. There they stayed – an unknown number of mystery gunmen who besieged the building from the inside.

They had taken over the home of members of a small sect of orthodox Jews called the Chabad movement. Just how many gunmen were holed up there is not known, as is the number of dead, the number of escaped and the condition of the hostages, if there were any.

Into this scene entered the black-clad commandos – members of the government's elite national security guard, specialists tasked with securing the safety of the prime minister and other dignitaries.

Alerted to the raid within minutes, they were dispatched from New Delhi and arrived in Mumbai at 4am. By 7am, they had set up command posts around Nariman House – well before the overall death toll of today's wave of terror attacks rose to 101.

The commandos replaced the army, which rolled up outside the Taj Hotel hours earlier, sporting jungle camouflage, twigs affixed to rounded helmets, bleary-eyed kids as confounded and disorganised as everyone else.

On top of a rooftop 30 metres from the building, the commandos waited. Politicians, journalists and cameramen gathered around them. IDs were left unchecked.

A single commando would look through his scope then put it back down. They sported Rambo-style knives, Glock pistols, black jumpsuits with balaclavas, and large, light, and powerful submachine guns.

"If we do something wrong, those human rights [people] will come and have our necks so we have to be careful about all these things," said one of the commandos, a stocky, mustachioed man. He gave a boyish smile and shrug before returning to his high-powered scope.

The streets were largely deserted. In the background, less than a mile away, smoke rose from Mumbai's most famous hotel. Here the buildings are arranged Escher-like, some half-built, some old-fashioned colonial-era gems, all thrown together. Hindu, Muslim, Jew.

Locals said the owners of Nariman House was a Jewish Israeli family who rented out flats to others religious Jews. Some neighbours said there were five families inside the building; others said just one.

The windows to the building were blown out. Curtains to the bedrooms swayed in the wind, occasionally providing a view of a wrecked interior, but with no sign of life.

The streets below, normally chaotic and crowded, were eerily still. The area is adjacent to an old fishing village and locals, who would normally be out in their boats on the

Arabian Sea, busied themselves showing the police, army and various commando units the way through the labyrinthine alleyways.

Then a grenade was tossed outside Nariman House, sending everyone diving for cover.

As the afternoon progressed, curious neighbours peeked out of their windows. Then at 4pm, 30 more commandoes joined police officers in the street. The commandos on the roof conferred. Nothing happened.

A helicopter flew overhead and everyone looked up – the helicopter made another low, slow pass.

The commandos took an occasional teabreak and told journalists of their accomplishments during a mosque siege in the state of Gujarat.

The number of witnesses grew as the day wore on. They started lining alleyways and crowding rooftops, pouring out of windows and construction sites. They became a crowd. Doubled in size, then doubled again. Goats chewed on rubbish. More time passed. The hostage crisis at the Oberoi continued. Still no news from inside the Nariman.

The rooftop was now getting very crowded. Three men in olive uniforms brought floodlights, adding to the surreal Bollywood-style atmosphere. A gaggle of local strongmen, their white shirts draped over bulbous paunches, busied themselves photographing the commandos with expensive camera phones.

More shots rang out, ricocheting off buildings.

"We blame the intelligence – the government spends so much money and nothing happens. Then these people come and do whatever they want," said local resident Richard Madhavan, 34.

Many residents are used to violence – either in the form of occasional gunfights between mobsters and police, or bombings. But no one was prepared for the running gun battles and coordinated execution of today's violence.

As a gorgeous sunset gave way to the incandescent glow of the streetlight, four army men set up a night vision device the size of a small telescope. They tinkered with the fixtures for 30 minutes. I asked the mustachioed commando what he wanted to do.

He looked at me. "Shoot," he said. "Shoot and finish."

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