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Death squads attack landmark after landmark in bloody three-day siege

AP Associated Press

updated 11/29/2008 7:11:14 PM ET

[MUMBAI, India](#) — At 9:21 p.m. Wednesday, two young men walk casually through Mumbai's main railway station, Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, a worn Victorian hulk bustling with late commuters heading home, scurrying past small food stands and juice bars and vendors selling newspapers.

They enter near the taxi stand, where long lines of battered black and yellow cabs wait for fares. One wears khaki cargo pants and a blue T-shirt. A pair of small knapsacks are slung over a shoulder. He looks like a college kid.

They are, says a photographer who follows them on part of their grim journey, "backpackers with assault rifles."

The two — and other death squads working in pairs — are to wreak carnage in landmark after landmark across Mumbai over the next three days, creating panic in this normally unflappable city and killing more



A gunman walks at the Chatrapathi Sivaji Terminal railway station in Mumbai on crowded train station in coordinated attacks across India's financial capital, taki

than 170 people.

'Firing from the hip'

Sebastian D'Souza hears the gunfire at Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus from his office across the street at the Mumbai Mirror tabloid.

He follows the sound through the sprawling station, slipping unseen through parked trains. When he first catches sight of the young men, he doesn't realize they are the gunmen. They look so innocent. Then he sees them shooting.

"They were firing from their hips. Very professional. Very cool," says D'Souza, the newspaper's photo editor. For more than 45 minutes he follows as they move from platform to platform shooting and throwing grenades. Often, D'Souza isn't even 30 feet away. The few police at the station are either dead, in hiding or had long fled.

There are billboards everywhere, signs of India's economic boom. At one point, he photographs them standing beneath a tea company sign. They appear to be having a calm conversation. "WAKE UP!" the billboard reads.

Ten gunmen

They were 10 gunmen, well-trained and armed with assault rifles and grenades, officials say. They had scouted their targets ahead of time. They knew the hallways and the basements. They even carried bags of almonds for energy. Police say they were Muslim extremists from Pakistan, and may be tied to India's long-running insurgency in the disputed, largely Muslim, Himalayan region of Kashmir.

They landed in an inflatable rubber boat not long after nightfall on a Mumbai beach, a semi-isolated stretch of sand and stone where fishermen bring in their boats during the daytime. From there, it was less than a 15-minute walk to their major targets.

The group fanned out across the city, hitting 10 spots in two hours. They chose some of the best-known landmarks, many popular with foreigners and the city's elite. Many of the attacks ended in minutes. But at two luxury hotels and a Jewish center they dug in, fending off hundreds of commandos for days.

About 9:30 p.m., the Nariman House, Mumbai headquarters of the ultra-Orthodox Chabad Lubavitch movement

A gunshot startles the family of Rabbi Gavriel Noach Holtzberg and others inside the recently renovated five-story Jewish center on a bumpy,

unpaved back road off a main street in Mumbai's trendy Colaba neighborhood. The pale yellow building, with its synagogue, kosher dining room and friendly rabbi, was a magnet for Israeli backpackers looking for a place to celebrate holidays while on vacation and an important religious center for Mumbai's small Jewish community.

Someone must be lighting firecrackers, thought Sandra Samuel, a maid at the center.

Then a gunman came up the stairs.

She and another employee duck into a room and hide in terror as explosions and gunshots rattle the building through the night.

"They destroyed everything, the lift, the dining room, everything," she says later.

About 9:30 p.m., Leopold Cafe and Bar

The place known as Leo's is one of the city's famous tourist restaurants, a joint crammed with glass-topped tables, old travel posters and loungin backpackers drinking cheap beer.

Maybe 100 people are inside when two gunmen appear in the entrances. One lobs in a grenade. Then they open fire.

"It was total chaos ... People didn't know what was going on. Some hit the floor, some ran out of the side entrance or tried to find a place to hide," says Farzad Jehani, who owns the restaurant with his brother.

The assault lasts, perhaps, two minutes. When it's over, at least four foreigners and three Indians are dead, though the brothers aren't sure beca patrons quickly rush the casualties to hospitals in passing cars and taxis.

By then the gunmen have left, jogging through the streets and apparently moving on to one of India's most famous hotels just a few blocks away.

"They weren't aiming at anyone in particular. It was like they wanted to empty their magazines and do as much damage here as possible before heading to the Taj," Jehani says.

About 9:45 p.m., Taj Mahal hotel

No one believes it's gunfire. Not at the Taj. Built more than a century ago by one of India's most powerful business families, the castle-like Taj Mahal is the crossroads of the city's elite. It has been the scene of countless society weddings, business meetings and expensive dates. It is an icon of Mumbai.

But it is gunfire that two men are spraying across the ornate lobby, with its gray marble floor and Persian carpets the size of small swimming pools.

Dalbir Bains, who runs a high-end Mumbai lingerie shop, is sitting down to a steak dinner by the pool with friends. They joke about hearing gunfire. Quickly, though, screams fill the hotel and her laughs turn to terror. She runs upstairs and huddles under a table in a restaurant with about 50 others, desperately trying to be quiet.

"The gunshots were following us," says Bains.

9:47 p.m., Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus

The gunmen are at the station, shooting toward a large glass-fronted restaurant.

They are "firing at people waiting for the train. Luggage was spread everywhere. The place was full of blood. There were lots of people lying there dead," says manager Fongen Fernandes.

Soon, though, everyone is dead or hiding. Except for corpses, the platforms are empty, d'Souza says.

The worst of the carnage appears to be in a waiting room for out-of-town trains. It was filled with dozens of bodies, many shot in the head. Over the next few days, authorities say, 53 people are killed.

Eventually, the gunmen steal a truck and drive away. A little later, one is killed by police and another, the only gunman taken alive, is captured. He is Pakistani.

At the station, authorities use wooden baggage carts to clear the corpses.

Says Fernandes: "They collected them away like sheep and goats."

About 10 p.m., Oberoi Hotel

Joseph Joy Pulithara, a waiter, is working in the Chinese restaurant of this modern luxurious monolith when the gunfire starts, sending diners a staff scrambling. Pulithara is shot in the leg. A woman nearby him is shot in the head.

The gunmen run into another restaurant and fire unrelenting bursts at the diners and waiters, says Andreina Varagona, an American meditation teacher shot in the arm and leg. At least a dozen people fall to the floor dead, including one of Varagona's friends.

"There were bodies everywhere," Varagona says. "I felt like I was in a movie."

The attackers herd dozens of survivors into a stairwell. One demands to see their IDs, saying he was looking for Americans and Britons. Then he forces them upstairs, says Alex Chamberlain, a British guest.

Chamberlain and many others throughout the hotel dash out in the chaos.

Staff in one restaurant spirit at least 60 diners into a back kitchen and then hustle them to another room where they are served refreshments and then escorted outside, according to the hotel's chairman P.R.S. Oberoi.

Other guests barricade themselves in their rooms.

The gunmen are taking hostages.

10:35 p.m.

Gunmen briefly attack a police station. A few minutes later they open fire at a hospital, then ambush a police car, killing five officers and driving away. Soon after, a bomb explodes in a taxi in the suburban neighborhood of Vile Parle. About 15 minutes later, a bomb goes off in another taxi inside the city. One person is believed killed.

Thursday morning, the Oberoi

A banner hanging from a window carries a simple but wrenching plea: "Save Us."

Inside, hundreds are hiding in their rooms, or being held hostage at The Oberoi.

The gunmen, armed with rifles and grenades, push Egyptian businessman Osama Embabi into a room where four or five people — guests from other Arab countries and hotel workers — are already being held.

"They shouted and warned us not to leave the room or we would be shot," he says.

Meanwhile, Lo Hwei Yen, a 28-year-old Singaporean lawyer, calls her husband, Michael, from her cell phone. She is being held captive, she tells him, and the gunmen threaten to kill her if Indian forces storm the hotel, Singapore media reports say.

After 9 a.m., Indian forces begin what will be a daylong operation to rescue the Oberoi hostages.

Lo's body is found on the 19th floor.

Across the city, it seems the Indian police and military may never catch up. They are fighting gunmen in three locations, including two of the city most famous landmarks, and hundreds of people are trapped. Fires burn occasionally in both hotels, and firefighters with water hoses and cherry pickers battle the blazes, but only when it's safe enough to approach the buildings. Gunshots and explosions have become the soundtrack of south Mumbai.

Residents have faced terrorism before, but this time it seems different.

"There is a limit a city can take," says Ayesha Dar, a 33-year-old homemaker.

10:45 a.m., Nariman House

The Jewish center is silent, except for the wailing of a child.

Samuel, the maid, cracks open the door of her hiding place and sees a deserted staircase. She runs up one flight and finds the rabbi's 2-year-old son Moshe crying beside his parents and two Israeli guests who lay still on the floor. His pants are drenched with blood. She grabs the boy, bolts down the stairs and out of the building.

'Very determined'

The soldiers who fought the gunman say they were tough, bitter opponents.

"It's obvious they were trained somewhere ... Not everyone can handle the AK series of weapons or throw grenades like that," an unidentified member of India's Marine Commando unit, his face wrapped in a black mask, tells reporters after his units stormed the hotels. The attackers were "very determined and remorseless."

About 7 a.m., Friday, Nariman House

Black-clad commandos fan out on the rooftops of the evacuated buildings surrounding the Jewish center and begin laying down covering fire.

A helicopter drops toward the roof. One after another, masked commandos slither down a rope. The helicopter returns with more commandos, then a third time with equipment.

Slowly, the assault team descends an outside staircase and begins clearing the building.

A small explosion erupts from the house. A few seconds later, two gunshots, a pause, then two more. For hours, a similar pattern is repeated. Hundreds are blasted in the building as hundreds of gawkers cheer from nearby streets.

5:39 p.m.

Indian commandos launch a rocket at one of the Jewish center's upper floors, shaking the neighborhood and blowing out windows in neighboring buildings.

6:15 p.m.

A small group of commandos appear in the street, raising their rifles in triumph. The crowd breaks through police barriers and floods the streets in celebration.

Inside the building, nine people lay dead, including the rabbi and his wife. According to Israeli media reports, some are wrapped in prayer shawls.

Friday morning, the Oberoi

Dozens of hostages clutching passports are rushed from the Oberoi hotel into waiting cars, buses and ambulances.

At 3 p.m., the government announces it has killed the two gunmen inside and taken control of the building.

The pair had killed 32 people — 22 hotel guests and 10 workers — and wounded many more.

By evening, more than 100 former hostages have been escorted from the building.

Overnight Friday

Fighting continues at the seaside Taj hotel. Authorities say one, perhaps two, gunmen are still inside. Explosions and gunfire ring out intermittently, intensifying at dawn. Fire, once again, streams out through broken windows, lapping at the stone sides of the building. Clouds of black smoke rise high above the Arabian Sea. Outside, dozens of reporters crouch in the seaside plaza in front of the Taj, and sometimes a half-dozen TV reporters can be heard at once providing breathless commentaries about the situation. Few bother to take cover.

8:30 a.m. Saturday

After so much destruction it ends quietly. There is no announcement of victory. One minute, there are explosions inside, and a few minutes later man walks casually out into the plaza out front — a place where soldiers in body armor had been sprinting in fear — and waves for firefighters to come put out the remaining blazes.

The Taj Mahal siege is declared over, ending three days of terror. It has been 60 hours since the first pair of gunmen walked into the train station.

Outside, bits of burned debris fill the plaza. Strings of white bed sheets, tied together, hang from the windows, reminders of those who escaped. Almost a dozen buses are parked nearby, just a few feet from the Arabian Sea. They are filled with soldiers and commandos finally getting a bre

Hundreds of people push their way toward the buses, pressing flowers into their hands.

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