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Israel Reacts to the Mumbai Massacre

By Tim McGirk / Jerusalem | Friday, Nov. 28, 2008

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Throughout Israel, shopkeepers and office-goers on Friday kept their radios and televisions tuned to the unfolding terrorist tragedy in Mumbai. They listened raptly to accounts of Indian commandos snaking down from helicopters onto the roof of the Chabad Jewish guesthouse in Mumbai, where inside two terrorists were holding at least six people hostage.

Israeli TV channels were on the scene in Mumbai, covering the explosions and the lengthy siege, interspersed with gun battles, that ensued as commandos fought their way from adjacent structures onto the roof of the five-story guesthouse



THE TIMES OF INDIA / REUTERS

Indian commandos are airdropped in Nariman House, where the

and then into the building itself. It was later confirmed that the Chabad center director, a young New York Rabbi, Gavriel Holtzberg, and his Israeli wife, Rivka, were among the five hostages found dead. Earlier, the couple's two-year-old son, Moshe, was rescued by an Indian maid who fled the building clutching the toddler. There are Chabad Houses around the world. Set up by the Chabad Lubavitchers, a Brooklyn-based movement of Orthodox, Hasidic Jews, the centers provide Jewish travelers with a place to pray in a synagogue, eat kosher meals, celebrate the Sabbath and keep in contact with their families by Internet. India is a favorite destination of Israeli back-packers and was considered fairly safe — until now. (See pictures here of the Mumbai terror.)

armed militants are believed to be holed out in Mumbai, November 28, 2008.

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Israeli officials are waiting to hear if the Jewish hostages were killed when commandos stormed the building, which is in a crowded Mumbai residential neighborhood, or whether they had been slain earlier by their captors, presumed to be Muslim militants.

Soon after terrorists struck Mumbai on Wednesday, Israel Defense Minister Ehud Barak offered to send help to India. "The attacks are part of a global wave of terror, which Israel is quite familiar with," Barak said. But India declined the assistance. Some Israeli officials voiced criticism over the way that Indian forces immediately began firing at the gunmen, rather than gathering intelligence on their adversary, or attempting to enter into negotiations with them first. Meanwhile, in India, rumors circulated that the Israelis had indeed been part of the rescue operation, a notion that may have been kick-started by the combination of Israelis staying at the Chabad house and the presence of foreign agents belonging to a security firm that happened to be in the Oberoi (also taken over by the terrorists) to prepare for the visit of an English cricket team.

Israeli officials were cautious about linking the attacks on the Chabad house to al-Qaeda or some of Israel's foes closer to home, such as Palestinian militants, Hamas or the Lebanese militia Hezbollah. They say that the terrorists' target was foreigners, not just Israelis, and that the attacks against luxury hotels, restaurants, a hospital, a train station and Chabad house were designed for maximum shock value.

Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said on Friday: "Our world is under attack, and it doesn't matter if it's in India or somewhere else. Only when things like this happen do we understand that we are partners in the same battle. This is a reminder to the world. We are the target, and it's not just Israel but the whole Western world. As we understand it, they were looking for guests with American, British, and Israeli citizenship." Several Israeli tourists and businessmen were among those held hostage in the Taj and Oberoi hotels but later managed to escape or were freed.

Israeli officials also remarked that the Mumbai gunmen never demanded the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails or even mentioned the Middle East conflict. Police say the gunmen spoke Urdu, a language of northwestern India and Pakistan, and their focus was on the disputed Himalayan state of Kashmir, where Muslim militants are fighting Indian troops for autonomy. Indian media reported that a terrorist inside the Chabad center phoned a local television channel to complain about abuses committed against Muslims in Kashmir by Indian troops, who are mostly Hindus.

"Ask the government to talk to us, and we will release the hostages," said the man, identified by the India TV channel as Imran. "Are you aware how many people have been killed in Kashmir? Are you aware how your army has killed Muslims? Are you aware how many of them have been killed in Kashmir this week?"

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