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Major counter-offensive against terror

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MUMBAI - The Army brought an encounter which had continued for more than 24 hours, to a near close on Thursday night with the Taj hotel, one of the last remaining holdouts, being cleared except for one terrorist.

The remaining terrorist is reported to be injured and is trading fire with the security forces trying to bring him down.

An Army column marched into the premises of the Oberoi, where militants are still holed up. It had earlier also succeeded in freeing some of the hostages, including 3 Israelis at the Nariman House, the third terrorist holdout.

The NSG and Army had launched a final offensive at the hotel. Meanwhile a major fire has started in the Taj. With flames reaching as high a 10 ft, it is the biggest so far and may seriously damage the building.

After the audacious terror attacks in the nation's financial capital, security forces were on Thursday engaged in a grim battle to flush out terrorists holed up in two luxury hotels and a Jewish residential complex where more than 200 people including foreigners were trapped as hostages or used as human shields.

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Elite commandos of the topline security forces from the Army, Navy, NSG and Rapid Action Force were involved in the raging encounter with unspecified number of heavily-armed terrorists in Taj and Trident (Oberoi) hotels where throughout the day grenade explosions set various floors on fire.

As dusk fell, there was expectation that the forces would intensify their assault to overwhelm the terrorists. The operation became complicated considering the fact that a large number of guests including foreigners were holed up

in the hotels. About 40 of them were believed to be taken as hostages by the militants and were being shifted from one floor to the other frequently.

About 20 to 25 terrorists were believed to have come in three small inflatable boats whose mother ship has been traced by Indian naval ships patrolling the Arabian Sea. The Indian Navy and Coast Guard have caught the ♦mothership♦ called MV Alpha that reportedly smuggled the terrorists in Mumbai from Karachi.

A CG spokesman said that searches were being carried out on board the ship but declined to elaborate. ♦The Naval and Coast Guards ships have since Thursday morning intercepted and checked antecedents of all the vessels operating or moored around the metropolis,♦ Vice-admiral J S Bedi Flag Officer Commanding in Chief Western Naval Command said earlier in the day.

The surveillance of large areas of the Arabian Sea is still on, Mr Bedi said as he disclosed that two Naval War Ships along with vessels from the Coast Guard, Helicopter and Dronniers Maritime reconnaissance Aircraft were involved in the massive sea-hunt. These comments come in the wake of eye-witnesses saying they had seen young men in their early twenties carrying heavy rucksacks.

Eye witnesses said they had seen young man carrying heavy rucksacks disgorge from High Speed Boats off the Gateway of India. Maharashtra Chief Minister Mr Vilasrao Deshmukh has said earlier on Thursday that the terrorists got ashore in South Mumbai from boats. In all, 101 people including nine foreigners and 14 policemen have lost their lives while about 300 people were injured in the worst terror attacks seen in the country in which desperate men fired indiscriminately at people.

Targeting foreigners, particularly Americans and Britishers, the terrorists said to be five to seven in both the hotels held residents hostages. In Trident alone, about 200 people were trapped - 100 on the Trident side and 100 on the Oberoi side. While there were no official

Advertisement for DominicanCupid.com, a dating and singles website. The ad features three photographs of women: two in the top section and one in the middle section. At the bottom, there is a green button with the text "JOIN FREE NOW".

figures available about the number of people trapped or rescued, DGP Mr A N Roy said all the hostages in Taj have been rescued. Mr Roy talked tough saying they would either kill or capture the terrorists alive.

There was also another scene of action in the Jewish complex Nariman House where four-five Israelis have been believed to have been held hostage by an equal number of terrorists. The Chief Minister, Mr Vilasrao Deshmukh said seven terrorists were killed by the security forces. One terrorist was caught alive in Trident hotel, Deputy Chief Minister, Mr R R Patil said. He has been identified as Abu Ismail hailing from Faridkot in Pakistan. The NSG commandos by evening cleared three floors of Trident hotel. Late in the evening, 10 more were rescued from this hotel.

Meanwhile, Ismail alias Zakiruallah, a Punjabi from Faridkot in Pakistan who was arrested by the Mumbai police on Wednesday night during the terror attacks, is giving interrogators the complete story of how the sensational terror operation was planned and executed. The Maharashtra government, which lost its top anti-terror police officer Hemant Karkare to terrorist bullets, on Thursday gave temporary charge of ATS to Mr K P Raghuvanshi, the Additional DGP of Railways.

The terrorists are believed to have come to Mumbai by a ship M V Alpha. Mumbai looked like a war zone as sharp shooters of army, NSG and other security forces stormed the landmark hotels to overwhelm the terrorists holed out there after several residents were rescued in the wee hours.

With top police officials confirming that terrorists used boats to transport their arsenal - and bypass routine security checks on Mumbai's roads - prior to their assault on the Taj Mahal Hotel and other prime targets in South Mumbai, talk is that marine terrorism is the new fear in town. Not true - or at least, not unanticipated.

On March 9, 2007, the Defence Minister, Mr A K Antony had cited intelligence reports to inform the Lok Sabha of the possibility that terrorists would use sea routes to enter the country. In his statement of the time, Mr Antony had identified maritime terrorism, gun-running and piracy as major threats along India's seas, and said the government had worked out a menu of measures aimed at enhancing coastal security. Mr Antony was quoting from intelligence analysis at the time that said that with the sealing of land borders along the North and West of India, terrorist outfits were increasingly looking to the sea as an alternate means of entry, and training cadres to use the sea lanes.

A month earlier, at a governmental security review meeting, top intelligence officials warned that Pakistan-sponsored terror groups were turning their attention to sea routes. Officials pointed at two prongs to this strategy: One, that sea lanes would be used to smuggle in large quantities of arms and ammunition thus foiling the routine road checks; and two, that

coast-based targets such as Mumbai's Bhabha Atomic Research Centre or Reliance Petrochemicals would be targets of future strikes.

Mr Antony had said the Coast Guard was working on methods to augment its infrastructure. A Rs 500-crore coastal security scheme had already been launched in 2005, and envisaged the creation of 73 coastal police stations across nine coastal states over a period of five years. To augment this, a scheme titled Operation Swan was discussed to strengthen security along the Maharashtra and Gujarat coastline.

Meanwhile, the President, Ms Pratibha Patil, Vice President, Mr Hamid Ansari and the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh have strongly condemned the deadly terror attacks in Mumbai and asked people to maintain calm. Such acts are highly condemnable, the President, who is on a four-day visit to Vietnam, said in a statement from Hanoi on Thursday. The Vice President said such terrorist acts were aimed at destabilising the nation and urged all citizens to unite in this critical hour. The Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, while condemning the terror attacks on Wednesday night, assured all help to Maharashtra in meeting the situation.

The Cabinet on Thursday took stock of the situation and reviewed the security scenario in the country. Security was stepped up in the poll-bound national capital following the terror strikes in Mumbai. Police personnel, who were keeping a vigil across Delhi which goes to polls two days later, have intensified their patrol and checkings in public places as terrorists targeted ten locations in the western metropolis.

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(ID:T571821)
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42kg 163cm
Ho Chi Min



Tanida
(ID:T818668)
Age:25,
44kg 157cm
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