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Dozens Die in **Mumbai Attacks**; Hotels Under Siege; Gunmen Said to Target Americans, Britons

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Gunmen attacked three luxury hotels, a hospital, a train station, a movie theater and other buildings in Mumbai late Wednesday, killing at least 100 people and wounding more than 300 in a rampage through India's financial capital, police said. The attackers took dozens of people hostage, and witnesses said they were seeking out Americans and Britons. An unknown group asserted responsibility in e-mails to India's news media.

The gunmen, armed with explosives, lay siege to two of the hotels all night. Troops stormed in to rescue people, some of them foreign nationals, who were trapped inside. The 105-year-old Moorish-style rooftop dome of the landmark Taj Mahal Palace & Tower hotel was engulfed in fire, and flames billowed out of many rooms. One wing of the waterfront hotel was gutted. Seven hours after the first attack, firefighters rescued more than 50 hotel guests and escorted them to ambulances.

At least six foreigners were among those killed in the attacks, said Ramesh Tayde, a senior police officer, according to the Reuters news agency.

The attacks largely occurred in the affluent southern quarters that are the heart of the financial district of this city of 15 million people. Hospitals were overwhelmed and sent out appeals for blood donations. Police said parts of the city remained under siege as of dawn Thursday, including a building that houses the ultra-Orthodox Jewish outreach organization Chabad Lubavitch, where a group of people was being held hostage. Guests were still trapped inside the 36-floor Oberoi Trident hotel, possibly as hostages. The third hotel to be attacked was the Ramada, to the north.

The identity of the attackers was not clear. A group calling itself the Deccan Mujaheddin asserted responsibility for the attacks in the e-mails. Intelligence officials said they thought it was a new

group and were unsure of its aims or identity. The name apparently refers to the Deccan Plateau, an area that spans eight states and covers much of central and southern India. The term "mujaheddin" suggests the attackers are Muslim extremists.

R.R. Patil, minister of internal security for the state of Maharashtra, said the gunmen came from the sea about 9 p.m. Wednesday, and a boat laden with explosives was later seized by police. About 9:25 p.m., eyewitnesses told reporters, two men with automatic weapons started firing outside the popular Leopold Cafe, after which the attackers moved toward the Taj hotel, firing at random as some of them moved to the city's main train station. Local trains were suspended after a high-security alert, and the police cordoned off the area, which is usually packed with night revelers at street food vendors and cafes. The hotel evacuated many guests, some of whom could be seen wheeling out their luggage, while others fled down the fire escape in bathrobes.

Witnesses told reporters that the gunmen initially asked for Americans and Britons. "They were young boys, maybe 20, 25 years old. They basically were saying they wanted anyone with British and American passports," said a Briton quoted by the Times Now television channel. "There were about 15 people, about half of which were foreigners. We went to the 18th floor. It became very smoky, and we escaped and ran down the stairs. They had guns, one machine gun and one rifle gun. They were in jeans and T-shirts. Just normal, casual."

A 34-year-old businessman, Ashish Jain, said in a phone interview that he was having dinner with his friends at the Taj hotel's rooftop restaurant.

"When I paid the bill and tried to leave, the hotel staff said there were terrorists in the lobby and that we could not leave. There were 150 of us on the rooftop, including some foreign nationals," he said. "It was really alarming to be trapped there for over four hours. We could feel the building shake with the explosions. We could see the smoke and the fire. People were panicking and crying. And finally the army and the police came and secured the fire escape exit, and we could get out."

A camera shot of a gunman broadcast on television showed a young man with curly hair wielding an AK-47 assault rifle and wearing a black T-shirt and jeans, a blue backpack slung over his shoulders.

Another security-camera image captured at the train station showed two young men wearing jackets and backpacks, each carrying a weapon. The floors of the station were stained with blood where the gunmen had fired at the crowd.

Officials said five attackers were killed and one was captured. Eleven policemen, including the chief of Mumbai's counterterrorism squad, Hemant Karkare, died in the fighting at the Taj hotel.

Since May, a wave of bombings has ripped through public places in several Indian cities, killing more than 200 people. Some of the bombings were followed by assertions of responsibility from a group calling itself the Indian Mujaheddin.

In an e-mail sent to newspapers in September, the Indian Mujaheddin warned that it would take revenge for the raids that the Mumbai anti-terrorism squads have been carrying out.

"Who they are is a matter that is still under investigation, because our first priority is to rescue the people trapped inside the two hotels. We do not have correct knowledge about how many people are still trapped. People are still inside their rooms," Vilasrao Deshmukh, chief minister of Maharashtra, said at a news conference in Mumbai. He also denied that foreign nationals were targeted. "It is not right to say that they were only targeting foreigners; most of the people killed were Indians."

In Washington, U.S. intelligence officials were closely monitoring developments in India while analysts studied the attacks for signatures of known terrorist groups. The preliminary assumption was that the attacks were linked to Muslim extremists, though not necessarily al-Qaeda or other well-known groups.

"The sophistication of the attacks and the choice of targets put Islamic extremists at the top of the list," a senior U.S. counterterrorism official said. "They are the most natural suspects." But the official noted that the Indian government has been targeted by numerous groups, some of which have mounted suicide attacks aimed at public buildings. "It is still an unfolding situation, and any hard and fast conclusions would be premature," said the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not permitted to talk about the events.

Private intelligence analysts noted that the attacks were markedly different from others that have occurred in India in recent weeks. The earlier attacks involved planted explosives detonated by remote control and were aimed at soft targets such as temples, markets and train depots. Most of those incidents involved Muslim extremists operating under the name Indian Mujaheddin. By contrast, the attackers Wednesday night chose relatively harder targets -- hotels -- and were essentially on suicide missions, the analysts said. The relatively large number of gunmen also suggests an attack that was carefully and professionally planned, said Brian Genchur, a spokesman for Stratfor, a private intelligence group.

"As opposed to trying to rile up extremist elements in India's Hindu and Muslim communities, the attacks in Mumbai are going after the country's tourism industry, spreading fear to Western tourists and businesspeople who frequent India, thereby hitting at India's economic lifelines," Genchur said in an e-mailed statement.

Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay, has been the scene of bombings that have killed hundreds of people since 1993. In the worst attack, 257 people were killed and more than 1,100 were wounded in a series of 13 bomb blasts in March 1993. Indian authorities blamed Muslim extremists for those attacks.

In July 2006, more than 200 people were reported killed in a series of blasts that ripped through railway trains and commuter rail stations in Mumbai. Police filed charges against 28 suspects belonging to a Pakistan-based Muslim group called Lashkar-i-Taiba and a banned northern Indian organization called the Students Islamic Movement of India. Police said the Pakistani intelligence service was behind the bombings. Pakistan denied the accusation.

Staff writer Joby Warrick in Washington contributed to this report.

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IMAGE; Photo By Reuters; A policeman escorts an elderly man at a railway station in Mumbai that was attacked by gunmen, who also struck three luxury hotels, a hospital, a train station, a movie theater and other buildings. The attacks occurred largely in the affluent southern quarters that are the heart of the city's financial district.

IMAGE; By Arko Datta -- Reuters; Smoke rises from the landmark Taj Mahal Palace & Tower hotel, left, where gunmen took hostages, including Western tourists. Unidentified hotel guests, right, are rescued by climbing out the windows. Teams of heavily armed gunmen also stormed a

popular restaurant, hospitals and a crowded train station. Police said parts of the city remained under siege as of dawn today.

IMAGE; By Gautam Singh -- Associated Press

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