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Pretoria News Weekend (South Africa)

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## **Mumbai:** courage under fire

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Tales of fear, bravery, and determination to survive have emerged as South Africans caught up in the **Mumbai** terror attacks return home today to their anxious families.

"I was so scared," recalls Linda Urmson who was talking to her husband Neil on the phone from **Mumbai**. "He screamed that there were gunshots. I heard huge bangs and then he was gone."

Neil and colleague Nicole Alcock were just two of at least 20 South Africans directly affected by the four-day long siege of India's financial capital this week.

At least 150 people have died and hundreds more been injured in a fierce battle between 30 heavily armed terrorists and Indian commandos.

South Africa's Consul-General Busi Khuzwayo said no South Africans were being held hostage anymore. She confirmed eight people were still unaccounted for.

Many South Africans will return home today following the terror attacks by armed gangs of young Islamic militants on the city's landmark hotels, the Taj Mahal and **Oberoi**, and other public places.

Among the South Africans in **Mumbai** were Eric Kieck and Charlotte Maipimele, of Pretoria, Alcock and Urmson who are from Johannesburg and Durban businessman, Yusaf Essop-Ismail.

Alcock and Urmson, of Investec, were on a business trip with clients and were having dinner in the Taj Mahal Hotel when it was attacked.

Essop-Ismail was metres away from the famous hotel and escaped with an Indian couple to safety.

Several kilometres away at the **Oberoi** Hotel, seven South African Airways (SAA) crew members were preparing for dinner when they were attacked. They huddled in their room for 36 hours, taking sustenance from a mini-bar after they ran out of water. Three colleagues were in the popular tourist restaurant, Café Leopold, when it was attacked by five gunmen.

The gunmen, calling themselves the Deccan Mujahedeen, driving cars that had been packed with explosives and armed with hand-grenades and AK-47s, stormed 11 sites, opening fire indiscriminately killing scores and taking dozens of terrified people hostage.

Describing the terror he felt, a Pretoria businessman who was in the lobby of the Taj Mahal Hotel

when the attacks began, said they did not know what hit them.

"It was terrifying," said the man who didn't want to be named.

"One minute we walking through the lobby and the next it was being blown and shot to hell. People were dying around us.

"I saw a woman collapse, blood pouring from her head," the man said by cellphone. "I tried to help but there was nothing we could do. We just ran. People were screaming and fighting to get past each other to safety," he said.

For Urmsom, the sound of gunshots coming to her over her husband's cellphone was "the most frightening sound" she has ever heard.

Urmsom said he and Alcock were having dinner on the 25th **floor of the Oberoi** Trident Hotel. In a brief telephone call he told the Pretoria News he just wanted to come home.

"All I want is to get back to my family. I just want this nightmare over," he said.

For Linda, the four-day nightmare has had an effect on her too.

"I was talking to Neil on his cellphone when he suddenly said there were gunshots and he had to go. I thought it was a joke and that kids were letting off crackers."

Two hours later, images of the carnage in **Mumbai** began streaming across the world's television screens. "When I saw what was happening I got a fright. I knew there was big trouble.

"What made it more scary was that I could not get through to him properly. "He sent me cryptic SMSs, saying they were barricaded in on the **19th floor**

The next moment, he said, there were gunshots from all sides of the hotel. And then nothing.

Several hours later, she received an SMS saying he was safe.

What she did not know at the time was that his safety was thanks to a group of seven South African security operatives who had been dining nearby.

The group, from Nicholls-Steyn and Associates, had been hired to secure the 20/20 Cricket Champions tournament in India.

Faisul Nagel, divisional head of sports security division, said it had been scary. "It is nothing I ever want to experience again. It was crazy," he said, adding they only knew what was happening when friends phoned to alert them.

"When we told we immediately leapt into action and got everyone together behind the kitchen," he said. "We knew we didn't have long."

Barricading doors with fridges and tables the group, guarding nearly 130 people, armed themselves with knives and meat cleavers, ready for the fight.

Once they got the all-clear, they moved everyone with them down a fire escape as explosives detonated all around them.

"It was close. If we had waited an hour we would have been in real trouble," Nagel said.

Consular-General Khuzwayo the 36 hour wait to hear the fate of her countrymen was excruciating.

"When I heard hand-grenades were being thrown at people fleeing the buildings and that hostages were being shot I thought: this is it. I thought they were dead.

President Kgalema Motlanthe said yesterday that the terrorist attacks were a reminder that intelligence agencies needed to "be on their guard".

Motlanthe said the world was shocked by reports and images of the terrorism in **Mumbai**.

"These and other events remind us that terrorism is real and that our intelligence agencies need to be on their guard if we are to rid ourselves of this scourge."

He sent heartfelt condolences to the people and government of India and those affected by the events.

See Page 10

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Sortierung Neueste zuerst

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⏪ ⏩ 29 von 91 ⏪ ⏩

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