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'Within two minutes, they were on us,' American recalls

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MUMBAI, INDIA - At first, waiter Joseph Joy Pulithara thought the blasts were rows of liquor bottles exploding for some reason behind the Mumbai hotel's sleek bar. Running to the scene, he found a woman screaming -- and a young man spraying gunfire.

The gunman was a member of a team that was well-armed, well-prepared and had just begun a two-day siege.

There was almost no time to escape. "Within two minutes, they were on us," Andreina Varagona of Nashville, Tenn., said from her hospital bed in the intensive care unit. Wounded in the right leg and right arm, her hair was still caked with a friend's blood.

An Indian commando said the attackers were indiscriminate. "Whoever came in front of them, they fired."

Inside the Taj Mahal and the Oberoi hotels, with their hundreds of rooms, the gunmen often seemed to have the advantage. They moved skillfully through corridors slick with blood, thwarting efforts to pin them down, and switched off lights and plunged the rooms into darkness to further confuse the commandos.

Many guests hid in their rooms until they were rescued. Others were not so lucky.

Pulithara found panicked diners and staff running through the hotel bar. In the chaos, it took him a moment to realize he had been shot.

"My friend said there was a hole in my pants, and I was bleeding," said Pulithara, 22, who was hit in the leg.

He saw a colleague shot in the head -- "She died on the spot," he said -- but he said he managed to pull a tourist to safety through a fire exit. Then he ran down a flight of stairs and was free.

For hundreds of others, however, the ordeal was just beginning.

Varagona, 45, a meditation teacher, was having dinner in the Oberoi's plush restaurant when the gunshots rang out. She said the gunmen kept firing, and bodies fell to the floor, at least a dozen.

She dragged herself into the kitchen, where employees were huddled for safety. They picked her up, she said, and carried her out. She said, "If it wasn't for the wait staff, I wouldn't have made it out."

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