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nsg-commando-recounts-gunfight-with-terrorists

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Mumbai: Indian commando Sunil Kumar Yadav spent nine hours searching for Islamic militants inside Mumbai's vast Taj Mahal hotel before he was fired on.

Yadav and his elite Black Cat commando squad, working in pairs, had cleared three floors of the hotel, escorting frightened guests to the fire escape through dark and smoke-filled corridors, when they came to a door which would not open with a master key.

"It was locked from inside," the bearded, 29-year-old commando told reporters from a hospital bed. "So we kicked down the door and charged a grenade."

Smoke filled the room and instantly a hail of bullets was fired from inside. "There was one militant - fair, lean, about 20-25 years of age," said Yadav, recalling returning the fire from his MP5 machine pistol.

The militant carried an AK-47 rifle and wore a vest of grenades. "There was a fierce exchange of fire. We could see he was burned from the fire started by the grenade," said Yadav. "At some point I was hit on my legs."

Yadav was dragged to safety by Major Sandeep Unnikrishnan, who was later fatally shot, the only casualty from India's elite commando force during the operation.

The last of the militants was gunned down early on Saturday, almost 60 hours after they came ashore in a rubber dinghy and rampaged through the city with grenades and assault rifles.

By government count, at least 183 people were killed in the frenzied violence.

"The hotel was a maze of doors and corridors and you didn't know from where the terrorists would emerge," said Yadav, lying on his stomach because of his injuries.

"Everything was charred, everything was enveloped in a thick black coat of soot."

The commandos were evacuating the hotel room by room, coming down from the roof of the six-storey building, and all they could hear was the sound of the militants firing and hurling grenades at security forces outside, Yadav said.

One of those fired on was police Inspector Deepak Dhole, who was in the same hospital being treated for burn injuries. "They had the height advantage firing at us, from upstairs and throwing grenades," said Dhole, a stout, balding man who has served in the police for 23 years.

"The grenade bursts started a big fire on the second floor where we were and it trapped us."

But reinforcements arrived soon and the gunmen were engaged by another set of officers while Dhole was evacuated. "I was hurt and in pain," he said. "But it was a greater pain to have to leave the operation midway."

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