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'I bumped into the terrorists'

Subhash K Jha, TNN Nov 30, 2008, 12.00am IST

Tags: Mumbai

*The **Mumbai** Police should talk to Singapore-based former city model Gurpreet Gill who was a resident of the Taj Mahal Hotel & Towers and reportedly encountered two of the suspected terrorists whose room was next door to hers.*

Gurpreet, who is Vivek Oberoi's former girlfriend, exclusively told BT, "I was in Room 640. These two young, normal-looking kids bumped into my husband and me and exchanged pleasantries. I believe their design was to take over the sixth floor, kill everybody on it, and then operate from there."

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Gurpreet and husband Daniel escaped certain death by a whisker. Friends of Greek tycoon Andreas Liveras, who was also on the sixth floor and was killed in the terrorist action, they were slated to attend a party on Liveras's yacht docked off the Gateway that Wednesday night. "We left the hotel at 9.25 pm. The killings began at 9.30," said the former model with a shudder. A regular at the Taj, she is now struggling to come to terms with the deaths of all the hotel staff whom she got to know closely over the years

She was unwell that night and almost did not go for Liveras's party. "But Daniel persuaded me to attend it for a little while," recalled Gurpreet. "I hate to think what might have happened to us if we hadn't gone." Their Greek host urged them to go ahead and take the first boat to his yacht; he wanted to catch a quick bite of chicken curry at the Masala Kraft restaurant in the hotel and would follow in the second boat, Liveras told Gurpreet.

As they walked towards the pier, Gurpreet and Daniel realised some commotion had begun in the hotel behind them. "We thought some celebrity had come in or there was a scuffle going on," she said. When the firing began, they thought they were firecrackers to celebrate the wedding reception being held there. By the time they reached the yacht, all hell had broken out in the Taj. "I sat in the yacht in a party dress and watched the mayhem happen like a Bollywood film until 11 am the next morning," cried Gurpreet.

The model and her husband from the yacht identified their room going up in flames. "My jewellery, our passports... everything was in there," she said with a choked sob. On the same floor was Taj General Manager Karambir Singh Kang's room that also exploded, killing his wife and two young children. Gurpreet and Daniel watched in horror, frightened and shivering, not

knowing what was going on. "Finally, next afternoon the Coast Guard and police came to fetch us from the yacht," she said.

But they couldn't disembark at the pier opposite the besieged hotel. "They took us to the back of beyond," she said. And once off the sea, there was nowhere to go for Gurpreet and Daniel, until Mumbai couple Aftab and Ayesha Patel who were also on the yacht offered to take them home. "We've been with them since then and are now friends for life," said Gurpreet. Incidentally, Daniel was at the Taj when the Gateway blasts of 2002 killed 30. "He looked down and saw bodies strewn everywhere," said Gurpreet. "We are fortunate to be alive."

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Gurpreet escaped certain death by a whisker. A friend of Greek tycoon Andreas Liveras, who was also in the hotel and was killed in the terrorist action, she went ahead to party on his yacht... while he stayed back to catch a quick bite and was felled by the terrorists' bullets.

-Andreas Liveras

Questions Mumbaiites are asking...

1How come the Colaba Police did not respond to the Leopold massacre? The restaurant is just across the road and the sound of the AK-47 gunfire, the screams of the victims, the chaos of motorists escaping the scene... ought to have been audible at least 100 metres away.

2Why weren't the casualties sent to elite, private hospitals like Breach Candy and Jaslok nearby, and even Hinduja and Leelavati further away, when the facilities and infrastructure at government-run St. George, GT and JJ Hospitals were clearly incapable of dealing with the vast number of injured, dying and dead?

3If the terrorists had detailed blueprints of the Taj and Oberoi, why weren't the NSG commandos provided with them before conducting rescue operations?

4What purpose did the visits by politicians like Sonia Gandhi, Manmohan Singh, L K Advani and Jaswant Singh serve? How dare Narendra Modi offer Hemant Karkare's family a cash compensation? Hadn't he criticised the ATS chief and called him anti-national just a short while ago?

5It took the combined efforts over 60 hours of the Mumbai Police and hundreds of commandos of the Army, Navy and National Security Guard to flush out just 20-odd terrorists armed with sophisticated weapons and explosives... how will we ever fare in a war with hostile, nuclear-armed neighbours?

6How did the few terrorists manage to carry on their campaign over three days without sleep and food? Whereas each place under siege had to regularly have fresh and new teams of commandos pressed into operation over the 60 hours.

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