

## Revealed: how Mumbai terrorist attacks nearly wiped out top management at Unilever

Many companies have contingency plans in place in case their top management should suddenly be killed in a freak accident. But few could be prepared for the shock of losing at once a chief executive, his successor and the entire board of a major subsidiary.



Firefighters try to douse the fire as smoke rises from the Taj hotel building in Mumbai, India on 29 November 2008 Photo: EPA

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Yet that is exactly what nearly happened to Unilever, the Anglo-Dutch company behind Ben & Jerry's ice cream and Dove soap, exactly one year ago when its top management was caught up in the terrorist attacks on the Taj Mahal Palace hotel in Mumbai, India.

Unilever was in the throes of changing its top brass. Patrick Cescau, the company's chief executive, and Paul Polman, the chief executive-elect, were engaged in a three month fact-finding tour of the company's operations around the world.

The pair were visiting Mumbai to see the work of Hindustan Unilever, a major business in its own right which is 51 per cent owned by Unilever.

To mark the hand-over, the board of Hindustan Unilever, including its chairman Harish Manwani and the division's chief executive Nitin Paranjpe, organized a dinner for Mr Cescau, his wife Ursula, and Mr Polman at the Taj Hotel.

The 20-strong gathering was in one of the main private dining rooms on the first floor of the hotel. A number of other dinners were taking place on the same floor.

The evening was progressing without incident until, just as the main course was about to be served, they heard what they believed to be the sound of exploding fire-works at a wedding reception next door. These were the opening exchanges in the terrorist attacks which would eventually leave 101 dead and hundreds injured.

The hotel's staff were the first to realise something was wrong. They ushered some other non-Unilever guests into the room, bolted the door, turned off the lights, and told the guests to get under the table.

Everyone turned off their mobile phones. No one said a word. The Unilever guests were very keen, according to friends, "to fool the terrorists into thinking it was an empty room". Sure enough, the terrorists came along the corridor and tried the door. It did not budge.

The terrorists tried to enter the room next door. They had more success there and took hostages, who were subsequently shot and killed. The terrified group sat in silence for a number of hours, listening to gunfire all around their room. They were able to keep in touch with Unilever's head office in London and as well as Hindustan Unilever's offices, using their Blackberry handheld devices.

Eventually a fire was started outside their room and the guests were worried they might be overcome by the smoke billowing under the bolted door. One source said: "They poured water over napkins and table-cloths and tried to seal the doors."

The only answer was to attempt a prison-break style escape by smashing one of the first floor windows and climbing down. One source said: "They tore down the curtains and tied them together, whilst others used chairs and tables to break the windows."

By now it is between three and four in the morning. A local fire crew saw the windows being smashed and, helped by fire ladders, the party made their escape. An Indian man who was not with the Unilever party was first out with his son, followed by all of the women, the rest of the Unilever party with Mr Polman bringing up the rear.

The whole party had escaped, without injury. One source later described how the party had fled the first floor room "in calm silence and with no panic. There was no attempted heroism or machismo".

Not surprisingly, life now looks a little different to the top brass at Unilever. One source

described the affair as “life-changing” for the Unilever team, adding that it had “brought them together in ways that they couldn’t have imagined. They all simply see themselves as incredibly lucky.”

Neither Mr Polman, Mr Cescau nor any of the group would speak directly to The Daily Telegraph about what happened. Mr Polman has turned down several requests for television interviews in recent days.

However, during an interview in the summer, Mr Polman, who had thought about becoming a priest in his early 20s, said: “Sometimes when something happens to you, you can’t do anything about, it but you can do something with it. That’s what happened to me because I’m now seeing a lot of qualities in people I didn’t see before.”

In March this year, Mr Polman, who holds no bitterness towards India, and Mr Cescau returned to the Taj hotel "to finish their meal", according a friend. The pair hosted a dinner, with the Hindustan Unilever board, for the manager and the staff of the hotel who had done so much for them during the terrorist attacks. When the hotel staff entered the room, Mr Polman and Mr Cescau told them to sit down - while they served them.

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