

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# Young men in jeans and T-shirts open fire indiscriminately

**RHYS BLAKELY, MUMBAI** THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEMBER 28, 2008 12:00AM

**ONE of the first indications that something was very wrong came at 10.30pm (4am AEDT), when two men were seen brandishing AK47 rifles and grenades in Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, Mumbai's magnificent main railway station.**

Seconds later, passengers were sent fleeing for their lives as the men sprayed the concourse with automatic gunfire. Within minutes, the city's security forces were being inundated by news of a wave of terrorist attacks across this city of 18 million people.

A five-minute car journey south from the station, next to the Gateway of India, Mumbai's most famous landmark, gunmen were storming the lobby of the city's finest hotel: the Taj Mahal. Armed with bombs, they were seeking British and American citizens, witnesses said. "They were very young, like boys really, wearing jeans and T-shirts," Rakesh Patel, a stunned British guest at the Taj, told an Indian television channel. He said that he had been among about a dozen foreigners who had been herded together by two heavily armed men and taken up to the hotel's upper floors.

"They said they wanted anyone with British and American passports and then they took us up the stairs. I think they wanted to take us to the roof," he said.

He and another hostage managed to escape when they reached the 18th floor. As he was speaking to the camera, there was a loud explosion from the roof of the hotel.

Bhisham Mansukhani, a journalist, was attending a wedding reception at the Taj, a luxurious haunt of foreign businessmen and Bollywood's elite, as the first shots were fired.

"I was inside the bar when glass shards almost hit my eye," he said. He described how he joined 200 other guests as they rushed to seek sanctuary in the hotel's business centre.

Outside the Taj Mahal hotel, injured guests were being carried away on the hotel's gold-painted luggage carts. Inside, there were reports that five terrorists were holed up in a room on an upper floor.

A short walk away, at Cafe Leopold, a restaurant made a landmark destination for foreign backpackers by Australian writer Gregory David Roberts's bestselling novel *Shantaram*, the walls were left pocked with bullet marks and the floors streaked with blood. The wreckage of a red scooter, the remains of shop awnings and broken glass were strewn across the street.

"They shot indiscriminately," Paul Stanley, an Australian tourist, said of the men who opened fire at the bar.

Sourav Mishra, a journalist who had been in Cafe Leopold, was injured. From his hospital bed, which he was sharing with three other people, he said: "I heard some gunshots ... I was with my friends. Something hit me. I ran away and fell on the road. Then somebody picked me up."

Nearby, in the heart of Mumbai's commercial district, witnesses described a "high-intensity" bomb blast at the Oberoi Hotel, a regular meeting place for businessmen and wealthy tourists. The explosion was heard across south Mumbai - many people first thought that it was a firework set off to celebrate a wedding. Police said that 20 people were being held hostage at the Oberoi last night.

"A gunman just stood there spraying bullets around, right next to me. I managed to turn away and I ran into the kitchen and then we were shunted into a restaurant in the basement," Sajjad Karim, a member of the European Parliament for the northwest of England, said.

Western visitors and Mumbai residents ducked under tables at the luxury hotels as staff members locked restaurant doors at the first rattle of gunfire and explosions.

Twelve hours after the first shots were fired, the terror attacks continued yesterday.

Paramilitary forces were preparing to storm the Oberoi building as smoke continued to pour from the hotel lobby. If their commanders were hesitating it was because of the fears that hostages were almost certainly being held inside.

Earlier, army commandos in battle-ready camouflage uniforms battled attackers in black shirts and jeans carrying shoulder bags filled with ammunition at the railway station, which was filled with commuters waiting to catch trains home.

Amid the carnage, mobile phone networks jammed and the city's police control room was flooded with calls. "I'm sorry, sir, all is confused," a rattled operator said from Mumbai's police control room.

As the first incidents were reported, it was thought that the violence could be the result of a turf war between two of

Mumbai's rival mafia gangs. As the report of fresh attacks kept on unfolding, a co-ordinated terrorist attack became the only tenable explanation.

As the death toll rose towards 100, panic broke out among residents that the city's hospitals were next to be attacked, with rumours circulating that shots had been fired at one. Across the city, the incidents brought back horrific memories of the last serious terrorist attacks to hit Mumbai: the bomb blasts of July 11, 2006.

On that day seven blasts on the rail network in 11 minutes killed more than 200 people. "We thought we had escaped," Anjan, a street trader, said close to the Taj. "But now we know. We should have learnt Bombay can't escape the terror."

Outside Cafe Leopold, armed police, rifles cocked at their hips, were anxiously keeping watch as they hastily assembled barricades. Close by, local traders were shouting at each other, scared and furious as fear spread across the city.

The Times, AP