

Operation Black Tornado continues

Sagnik Chowdhury Posted online: Fri Nov 28 2008, 01:43 hrs

Mumbai : Over 24 hours after they brazenly attacked some of the most visible icons of Mumbai and killed at least 125 people, unidentified gunmen continued to hold two popular five-star hotels and a Jewish residence in their grip even as the police said they were confident of ending the ordeal soon and freeing the dozens held hostage.

The day was marked by gun battles between the security forces and the gunmen — the operation by the security forces has been named “Black Tornado” — stray blasts (believed to be grenade explosions) and sections of the two hotels catching fire, interrupted by long stretches of quiet as the two sides apparently sized each other and planned their next moves. In between, security forces crawled their way through the hotels and managed to, bit by bit, evacuate people who were trapped inside or were held hostage.

The dead included at least nine foreigners and 14 policemen, among them some senior officers, while over 325 people were reported wounded. Details about the background of the victims remained sketchy as authorities were more focused on ending the horror at the two hotels and the residential building. This is our “9/11 situation” said K L Prasad, Joint Commissioner of Police (Law & Order).

Police said they had killed five of the attackers, some of whom had raided the CST railway station. While one more suspected attacker was arrested, nine people had been picked up for questioning, police sources said.

The impact of the attack, which began on Wednesday night, shut down the heart of the financial capital on Thursday.

Schools, colleges and even the Bombay and National Stock Exchanges remained closed on Thursday. Attendance in south Mumbai offices was thin and traffic was a trickle, although the local trains operated normally after lines were disrupted on Wednesday night.

TAJ Mahal HOTEL

The attackers moved between floors and engaged troops in gun battles and threw grenades at them. The impact saw some sections of the hotel catching fire at least three times, only to be put out by firefighters. Through the day, guests were evacuated sporadically in groups of eight or 10. Agency reports said security forces brought out at least 40 bodies from the first four floors of the six-storey hotel. Six chefs and a few trainee staff were believed to be among those who perished in the terror strike. The NSG claimed all but one terrorist inside Taj were killed and the operation would be wrapped up soon, added agency reports.

TRIDENT OBEROI

HOTEL

Progress to counter this attack was slower as it involved two inter-connected hotels with about 800 rooms between them and an estimated larger number of hostages and attackers than at the Taj Mahal. Security forces entered the complex only towards the evening, resulting in sporadic blasts, gunfire and a portion of the hotel catching fire. Evacuation of guests was also slower here with only one large group of 30 guests coming out in the evening.

NARIMAN HOUSE

A cat-and-mouse gun battle between security forces and at least six armed men, believed to be holding Israeli hostages, continued to rage well into Thursday night at this residential building in south Mumbai's Colaba Market. Three persons were killed by the terrorists, and five wounded. Four Israeli nationals, including a Jewish rabbi and his wife, continued to be held hostage, with unconfirmed reports suggesting that all four were either unconscious or dead.

— With inputs from Smita Nair and Mustafa Plumber