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# Navy wanted written request to send commandos

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Bureaucratic wrangles and red tape gave the Mumbai attackers a lead time of more than six hours to wreak havoc in the two besieged hotels of Taj and Oberoi Trident

*And they wanted the chief secretary to send the note, not the police chief*

NEW DELHI: Bureaucratic wrangles and red tape gave the Mumbai attackers a lead time of more than six hours to wreak havoc in the two besieged hotels of Taj and Oberoi Trident on November 26.

Piecing together the events of that fateful night, the story that emerges is one of chaos and confusion, of a government without a clear command and control system to deal with terrorist attacks, of bureaucratic delays of the worst kind.

Was anyone in charge that night? The answer is no.

According to reports available with the central government, the counter-terrorism operation ran into bureaucratic walls even as it became apparent that the attack was an extraordinary one. The navy wanted a written request for help. The National Security Guard in Delhi wasted time waiting for a transport plane that came from Chandigarh when the government could have commandeered any commercial aircraft in Delhi.

A highly placed source in the government estimated that there was a six-hour delay in starting the commando action. This pushed up the toll considerably.

A senior Maharashtra government officer said what hampered them the most was the absence of a "single-point command" to which they could direct their requests for help and reinforcements.

The chief secretary, additional chief secretary (home), and a clutch of other bureaucrats made desperate phone calls to top government bosses in Delhi asking for help and intervention.

The so-called crisis management committee (CMC) in Delhi, headed by cabinet secretary



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KM Chandrasekhar, met only after midnight, that too when National Security Adviser MK Narayanan finally arrived at Race Course Road - the prime minister's official residence - from a dinner party.

The members of the CMC monitored developments from home, watching television and talking on their cell phones. Narayanan was in similar mode at the dinner party he was attending. He left only at 11:15pm, when prime minister Manmohan Singh summoned him and members of the CMC for an emergency meeting.

Though a decision to send the NSG was taken early, the deployment of the commandos was delayed because the transport carrier, an ancient Russian-made Il-76, had to be fetched from Chandigarh. The commandos were ferried in rickety buses from Manesar in Haryana, where they were stationed. They boarded the plane to Mumbai at around 2am.

The NSG's journey took three hours because the Il-76 is a slow plane. From Mumbai airport, they were transported again in BEST buses without pilot cars to clear the roads. By the time they took up positions outside the hotels, dawn was breaking and the terrorists had done their worst.

### 'We want it in writing'

The Western Naval Command refused to deploy marine commandos without a written request. It rejected the Mumbai police commissioner's letter, saying that no one less than the chief secretary would do. Under government rules, even a district magistrate can requisition help from the defence forces. The Mumbai police commissioner is much higher in rank

### Commandos declined to go in

In the end, the Maharashtra chief secretary had to prepare a letter and fax it to the navy. The marine commandos finally reached the hotels some two hours after the terrorists seized them. But they refused to go inside on the plea that they were not trained for such operations. They stayed outside, firing intermittently at the hotels while the terrorists moved around freely inside, killing at will.



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