

Mumbai: What really happened

An accurate picture of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai could prevent al-Qaeda carrying out similar atrocities here, says BBC Newsnight correspondent Richard Watson.



A man with a gun was spied at the Chatrapathi Sivaji terminal railway station Photo: AP

Richard Watson

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As the last light ebbed from the sky, ten heavily armed men coaxed their dinghy towards the fishing shacks at Badhwar Park. Cutting the Yamaha outboard engine they drifted into shore. The jetty was silent except for the roll of the waves washing the city's flotsam ashore. It was 26th November: the men who would terrorise Mumbai over the next 59 hours had arrived.

A local fisherman watched as they unloaded their bags. Their well groomed, youthful appearance and neat western clothes stood out, as did their modern inflatable dinghy and heavy bags.

Two men stayed with the dinghy, pushing back out to sea. Their targets were the five star Trident and Oberoi hotels at Nariman Point, a short journey by boat. The remaining eight split into pairs. Walking up the jetty they shoved an inquisitive fisherman out of the way, ignoring his challenge, and fanned out across the city.

Each man carried a large rucksack containing an AK47 assault rifle, 500 rounds of ammunition, a pistol, eight hand grenades and improvised explosive devices – enough firepower to outgun the police for three days.

They attacked the main railway station, five star hotels and a popular café, killing 166 people and injuring hundreds more. With guests cowering in hotels some of the horror was played out live on television. For those planning the assault, the propaganda value could not be surpassed.

I travelled to Mumbai to investigate the background to these attacks and to re-trace the gunmen's steps across the city. I was also following in the footsteps of western intelligence agents and counter terrorism police officers who have been in Mumbai to learn the lessons from 26/11 so they can assess the vulnerabilities of their own cities. There is acute concern that similar deadly attacks could be launched by Al Qaeda in western capitals including London.

I started my journey at the Leopold Café in Colaba, one of the oldest commercial districts in Mumbai. It was another busy night for Eric Anthony, the young general manager, dressed in designer t-shirt and jeans. All his tables were full and the café resounded with laughter. Bowing his head he brushed a hand past his right ear to show me a bullet graze. "If I'd been any slower my brain would have been split in two".

Eric explained that on the night of 26/11 Eric had seen two young men pause on the busy street outside, deep in conversation on mobile phones. With their heavy rucksacs they looked no different from the scores of travellers who throng the café every evening, soaking up the atmosphere, drinking beer. Yet at 9.35pm precisely they pulled out their AK47s from their rucksacs and entered the café through separate doors, spraying bullets before them.

"Everyone sitting here died", Eric explained, pointing to the back right of the café where the terrorists had rolled grenades. "It was terrible, blood and flesh covered the floor. We lost two of our waiters, one died before my eyes."

Eric now welcomes visitors who want to inspect the battle scars. A 4cm deep hole in the far wall, discreetly covered by a framed picture, betrays the path of an AK round. A perfectly spherical dip in the concrete floor marks a grenade explosion – ten were killed here.

Within minutes the terrorists were gone, walking down the crowded lane towards the world renowned Taj Mahal hotel, firing as they moved, killing another thirteen bystanders. At the Taj, they met with another terrorist team who had already left improvised explosive devices outside. Entering the hotel they raked the reception area with automatic fire and climbed to the upper floors searching for hostages. New cctv images reveal them calmly walking through corridors and the lift area, AK47s in hand, rucksacs on their backs. They may have been dressed in casual clothes but this was a professional commando operation in every other respect.

Mumbai's police headquarters lies in a crumbling, dusty compound not far from the tourist

district of Colaba. I arrived with an appointment to see Deven Bharti, one of the senior officers in Crime Branch. Tiers of rickety verandas drew my eye up to the fifth floor of this old colonial building where he was waiting in the cool of his air conditioned office, one of the very few in this creaking complex.

The Mumbai police have faced severe criticism for their response to the attacks, even though many officers died bravely. They were heavily outgunned, initially confronting the terrorists with archaic rifles and sticks. Then there was command and control: it took 12 hours to get elite commandoes to the scene.

Beyond the failures of the police response, there is the broader question of what the investigation has revealed about the attack. Deven Bharti says his team of 54 detectives has turned up incontrovertible evidence that all roads lead back to Pakistan. "The evidence clearly points to the conspiracy hatched within the territorial limits of Pakistan and the ten terrorists launched from their soil", Bharti explained.

I was led into the investigation room. Twelve officers sat at wooden desks piled high with paper files, preparing case notes and sifting evidence on laptop computers. Fans whirred overhead, cutting through the saturated, pre-monsoon air. Some 11,000 pages of evidence have been prepared for the trial of the only surviving terrorist, Ajmal Kasab. And prosecutors want to make the most of this. After suffering years of terrorist attacks from Islamist militants, they have finally captured a Pakistani terrorist alive.

Forensic evidence has been gathered and analysed with the help of Scotland Yard and the FBI. It is impressive. The terrorists hijacked an Indian fishing vessel, the MV Kuber, several days before arriving in Mumbai. They had intended to scupper the boat four nautical miles offshore, after they launched their dinghy to make the final journey. In a rare failure, they left the MV Kuber afloat leaving vital evidence to be discovered.

A Global Positioning System device was analysed by the FBI. The police evidence dossier states it showed 100 track back marks in Karachi, they believe the terrorists practised with the device there. Foodstuffs and household goods were recovered from the boat bearing Pakistani company names. The serial number of the Yamaha outboard motor was traced; it was imported by a firm in Lahore. Unexploded grenades recovered from the attacks bore the mark of the arms company Arges but they were made under licence by a Pakistani arms firm in Rawlapindi; the pistols carried a manufacturer's stamp 'Peshawar'.

Furthermore, Ajmal Kasab has named his leader as Zaki ur Rehman, a suspected leader of Lashkar e-Taiba who has been put under arrest in Pakistan.

Of most interest, however, is the way the ten terrorists were communicating with their leaders who were directing events minute by minute on mobile phones. They were routing all calls over the internet. During the attacks on Mumbai, Indian intelligence officers managed to intercept calls made using this internet account. As we discovered, these intercepts, some of which we obtained, are crucial to the police investigation, especially in relation to the attack against the Jewish centre at Nariman House.

Nariman House was run by an orthodox Jewish couple, Rabbi Holtzberg and his wife Rivka. Rivka was five months pregnant at the time of the attack. On the night of the 26th November, two terrorists entered the maze of back alleys which lead to Nariman House and opened fire. Bullets were ricocheting off cement walls, glass was raining down. They quickly entered the building and took Rabbi Holtzberg and his wife hostage.

It is astonishingly clear from these calls that the terrorist leaders, said to be in Pakistan, knew every move the police were making as the hostage crisis unfolded. Here's one exchange we translated from the tape:

(Terrorist in Nariman House) "Is there anyone in our building?"

(Terrorist controller) "Look at the terrace at the back – the police are there. There's a building under construction, they're on top of that building and there's a lot of police on the main road. You know the Merchant House? They're sitting behind the protruding rear wall and firing shells. You talk to them and God willing they'll leave."

In other disturbing telephone calls which Newsnight will broadcast the terrorist leader cynically consoles the Rabbi's wife suggesting she will live to celebrate the Sabbath if she cooperates by passing on demands to the Israeli consulate. Hours later he gave the order for their murder.

So how did the leaders know the police positions in such detail? Mumbai police say the they were watching live TV in Pakistan. But these instructions seem remarkably precise for that. I know the kind of live-shots used in these situations and they would be unlikely to yield that kind of detail. It is far more likely that they had spotters on the ground who were feeding back information to their leaders about the police movements. If this is true then it means a Lashkar e-Taiba cell in Mumbai which played a crucial role in the attacks which is still undiscovered.

Additional Commissioner Deven Bharti denies this. I asked him whether he thought there were other logisticians in Mumbai who have yet to be caught. He replied: "No I don't think so. This investigation has reached a logical conclusion and we have verified and cross checked each and

every fact available to us. This was a totally independent module of ten terrorists who were launched from the territorial limits of Pakistan like a commando group."

Politically, of course, it would be very damaging for India to discover that local Indian Muslims were involved. One man has been arrested and charged with providing video and maps of targets but he was in custody for another offence at the time of the attack. The police are adamant this was a wholly Pakistani operation, and for now at least, it seems as if their investigation is closed.

** Richard Watson is a correspondent with BBC Newsnight and his film about the Mumbai attacks will be shown Monday on BBC2 at 10.30pm*

How we moderate

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