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COVER STORY

The war zones

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Mumbai has seen terrorist attacks but not one like this. The fightback, too, was unique.

PTI/COURTESY INDIAN EXPRESS



Victims of the terror attack, near the swimming pool of the Taj.

TRAGEDY AT TAJ

AT 9.30 p.m. on November 26, armed men stormed into The Taj Mahal Palace & Tower hotel at Apollo Bunder near the Gateway of India in South Mumbai.

For nearly three days, the terrorists held hundreds of people hostage, shot several persons dead and set fire to many areas in the heritage hotel. After intense fighting to secure the other three buildings (the Trident, the Oberoi and Nariman House) where the terrorists held hostages, the National Security Guard (NSG) finally took control of the Taj at 8.30 a.m. on November 29.

On the evening of November 28, the battle seemed to have abated and it was thought that the operation was finally over. However, on Saturday morning, fresh explosions and gunshots were heard. And then, suddenly, the drama came to an end. The NSG chief, J.K. Dutt, said the commandos found the bodies of four terrorists and believed that the whole place had been flushed out.

The State government told the media that around 100 bodies were recovered after the 58-hour Operation Cyclone ended. However, Dutt said that until the place was completely sanitised, he could not give a correct figure. Police and NSG personnel were treading carefully among the strewn bodies as they feared that the terrorists may have left live grenades under them, which would detonate when they were lifted.

Soon after the attack began, several guests and staffers were rescued from the premises. But as the crisis escalated, the number of people coming out reduced, and after the final assault on the gunmen, there was not a single person alive or dead emerging from any of the exits.

Continuous firing and blasts were heard from the Taj on all the three days. Smoke was billowing out of the windows and glass panes shattered across the five-storied old wing of the 105-year-old hotel. The entire action seemed to be taking place there.

At various points during the three days, grenades were lobbed from the building and bullets went whizzing past bystanders watching the scene of action from a distance. One foreign journalist and a bystander were injured.

SANTOSH HIRLEKAR/PTI





Firemen rescuing a guest at the Taj.

There were many scary moments for the mediapersons and television crew slouched on the open space outside the hotel to give the best possible coverage.

Relatives and friends of the people trapped inside the hotel were visibly tense. Sonali Shah, whose aunt was inside, said: "All we want is some information. Nobody is giving us any. We have gone to all the hospitals and morgues, but my aunt is still missing. I can only hope she is hiding in her room and that her room is not on one of the floors on which the fires are raging." Shah had been standing for more than 18 hours since she heard the news.

An eyewitness to the initial phase of the attack, N.N. Krishnadas, a Member of Parliament, told *Frontline* that he was in the Shamiana restaurant when two men in black stormed into it and started firing on the diners.

"We immediately ducked under the table and remained there for some time. I think two people were killed. After that we could hear gunshots for a long time coming from the lobby area. A restaurant staffer then took all of us to a big long hall where we lay flat with about 100-150 people for more than 24 hours. We saw the terrorist shoot two foreigners who tried to escape. There was blood and bodies all over the place. It was madness in there."

Krishnadas was rescued in the morning by the NSG and taken to a police station. He says the terrorists looked like young men. He did not hear them say anything when they first walked in.

60 HOURS OF TERROR IN MUMBAI

9.15 p.m.: A group of young men (number uncertain) wearing backpacks arrive in a boat at Cuffe Parade fishermen's colony, according to eyewitness accounts. Another dinghy docks at Saseon Docks, also a landing point for fishermen. The men move out in groups and strike first at Leopold Cafe, firing at random. Minutes later, two or three men hurl a grenade at a petrol pump near Nariman House; the facade of the petrol pump is destroyed. At 9.30 p.m., three men force their way into Nariman House.

9.30 p.m.: Two terrorists enter the waiting hall of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus railway station and shoot at passengers. They hurl grenades between platforms 12 and 15.

9.30 p.m.: About 10 men enter the new wing of Taj Mahal Palace Hotel and open fire in the lobby.

9.35 p.m.: An unknown number of gunmen enter Oberoi Trident and open fire indiscriminately. At least 20 people, mostly foreigners, are taken hostage.

9.55 p.m.: Bomb explodes in a taxi in Vile Parle; three people are killed.

10.30 p.m.: Terrorists come out of Cama Hospital in a hijacked car and fire randomly; 5 dead including a police inspector, 2 constables and 2 watchman.

10.50 p.m.: Two terrorists are killed at Girgaum Chowpatty while fleeing.

NOV 26

NOV 27

No. of security forces involved

477 NSG commandos; 400 members of Mumbai Police, a unit of marine commandos, six Army columns, and men of the Indian Army Engineers Regiment.

The victims

Total number dead: 183

- Civilians (Indians): 141
- Foreigners: 22 (Three each from Israel and Germany; two from Canada; one each from the U.S., Italy, China, Thailand, Mauritius, Singapore, Britain, Japan and Australia. Five still to be identified.)
- Security forces: 20 (NSG commandos 2; Policemen: 18)
- Terrorists: 9 (one arrested)

Total number injured: 239

- Indians: 216
- Foreigners: 23

Nariman House

Nov 27

7:00 a.m.: Evacuation begins.

11:00 a.m.: A terrorist is injured in the exchange of fire.

2:45 p.m.: Terrorists throw grenades in nearby lane, no casualties.

Taj Mahal Hotel

Nov 27

3:30 a.m.: Fire noticed on the dome of Taj Mahal Hotel.

6:35 a.m.: Army takes charge; NSG commandos arrive.

Noon: 50 people evacuated.

4:30 p.m.: A room on the fourth floor is on fire.

Nov 28

Oberoi Trident

Nov 27

6:00 a.m.: NSG storms hotel.

3:25 p.m., 6:00 p.m. and 6:45 p.m.: Several hostages, including foreigners, are taken out.

7:10 p.m.: One terrorist arrested.

<p>Nov 28</p> <p>7:00 a.m.: Commandos dropped on to the roof.</p> <p>7:30 a.m.: Seven people rescued – a family of three, and four others.</p> <p>4:40 p.m.: Huge explosions heard.</p> <p>5:40 p.m.: Commandos install IED, blow a hole in a wall on the third floor.</p> <p>8:40 p.m.: Operation ends. Eight people dead – four Israelis, one NSG commando and three terrorists.</p>	<p>11:50 a.m.: Intermittent firing through the night.</p> <p>1:05 p.m.: Rapid Action Force personnel arrive; one terrorist is still in the building.</p> <p>6:30 p.m.: Fire breaks out on the first floor.</p> <p>7:20 p.m.: Fierce gun battle between terrorists and NSG commandos in the ground floor.</p> <p>Nov 29</p> <p>3:40 a.m.: Firing resumes after overnight lull. Five explosions in a span of 30 minutes.</p> <p>7:30 a.m.: Heavy and sustained gunfire heard.</p> <p>9:05 a.m.: Commando chief J.K. Dutt tells media that three militants have been killed.</p>	<p>7:25 p.m.: Fire breaks out on fourth floor.</p> <p>Nov 28</p> <p>8:30 a.m.: Terrorists and NSG battle it out until 3:00 p.m.</p> <p>3:00 p.m.: NSG chief announces the killing of two terrorists and the success of the operation.</p> <p>3:45 p.m.: Hostages step out.</p> <p><small>Graphics: B. Srinivasan</small></p>
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As the operation ended, tragic stories of lives lost in the hotel are being revealed. Karambir Kang, the hotel's general manager, lost his wife and two children in a fire that broke out on the floor in which they were staying. In spite of this personal tragedy, Kang was seen on November 29 working with the other staff in cleaning up the hotel.

A senior journalist and noted food critic with *The Times of India*, Sabina Sehgal Saikia, was trapped in her room on the sixth floor. She was in touch with her friends until about 2 a.m. on November 27. In SMS messages to her friends, she told them she could hear loud blasts and plenty of firing. Her last message said she was lying under the bed as a fire had broken out. Her body was found in a crouching position and the post-mortem report said she was asphyxiated.

Vijay Banja, a head chef, was in touch with his wife Farida until 3.30 a.m. on November 27. After that the family lost contact with him. An employee who was rescued from the hotel told Farida that just as Banja was getting out of the kitchen he was shot. He had cleared the kitchen of all the staff and was the last to leave.

"He was a cheerful person," said a relative. Banja is survived by a 16-year-old son, whose Christian confirmation was to be held this December.

The Taj is one of Mumbai's most favourite landmarks. Built by Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata in 1903, the building was one of the first sights a visitor travelling by ship would see of the city. That was before the Gateway of India was built in 1924.

Most Mumbaikars have grown up on stories about the Taj. The most popular one is that because Tata was denied entry into Watsons Hotel at Fort as it had a strictly "for Europeans only" policy, he decided to build a big and grand hotel that would be open to all.

Sure enough, this hotel has a "no discrimination" policy. Anyone is free to walk in. If a budget tourist visiting Gateway of India wants to use the bathroom of the Taj, he has the freedom to do so. According to informed sources, despite several threats the Taj continued to have a liberal policy towards its visitors. In 2003, a bomb blast outside the building near the Gateway of India alerted the hotel management on the need to beef up security. Clearly, what it did was not enough.

Speaking to the media after the attack, Tata group chief Ratan Tata said: "We must stand together, shoulder to shoulder, as citizens of India and rebuild what has been destroyed. We must show that we cannot be disabled or destroyed. But that such heinous acts will only make us stronger."

OBEROI-TRIDENT SIEGE

GURINDER OSAN/AP



Hostages rescued from the Oberoi-Trident hotels.

AT 4 p.m. on November 26, the scene at the Trident hotel and its neighbour, the Oberoi, was typical of five-star hotels. Valets parking vehicles, cars being driven up the driveway by chauffeurs, people dressed in expensive clothes walking in and out of the main doors. Everything looked polished and clean.

All that changed at 9.30 p.m. Gunmen walked into the Trident hotel and opened fire in the lobby. Several guests and visitors who heard the gunshots rushed out of their rooms or tried to leave the building. Many escaped but hundreds remained trapped for nearly two days.

A fierce battle raged between the security forces and the terrorists. Until the time the NSG secured the hotel, blasts and heavy firing could be heard continuously. Mediapersons gathered outside could see guests peering out of the windows. There was little anyone could do.

Army vans, NSG personnel, the fire brigade and the Mumbai Police were on standby outside the hotel during the entire operation, and men in combat gear were positioned at strategic points in nearby buildings.

By the evening of November 27, the area around the Air India building near the two hotels was packed with onlookers. Some of them had come with binoculars, while others were just milling about soaking in the drama. One man said: "I have been here since the action began. I only went home to change."



NSG Commandos are air-dropped on Nariman House on November 28.

As the siege continued, more and more people began flocking to the area. One person had come from the suburbs to the see "commandos". Since the city's entire forces were deployed in the operation, there was apparently no manpower left for crowd control.

At about 1 p.m. on November 28, the NSG declared the siege within Trident-Oberoi over. Three terrorists were killed in the combat operation.

At last count, 32 bodies were found in the Oberoi. Informed sources said many of the victims had gunshot wounds. Information given from the hotel said through the two days of the operation, nearly 350 people were rescued from the hotel. But informed sources say that in a hotel of this size the casualty rate would be high. The police believe that they have removed most of the bodies. The dead included, four resident guests, three foreigners, 18 diners and 10 staff members.

It was only in the late afternoon that the hostages from the Oberoi began emerging. The scene outside the Air India building, where the relatives were told to receive their family members, had been grim the whole day.

"We have had no information. Nobody gives us updates. All we know is that there is some list of survivors and our uncle's name is on it," said one woman, who did not want her name to be in print. The list brought hope to her family. But at 7 p.m., she was told he had been shot dead the previous night itself.

An eyewitness, who wished to remain anonymous, said shipping company owner Sunil Parikh and his wife Reshma were shot dead at the Tiffin restaurant at the Oberoi. The couple had barely sat down to dinner when the terrorists opened fire. A friend of theirs, who managed to hide under a table, escaped after the gunmen left. He went to the Parikhs' home to inform the family about the shooting.

A Singapore national was apparently told to call her husband and tell him to tell the media not to send in troops. She was shot after the phone call. Another eyewitness account said the Oberoi staff had guns put to their heads and told to set the restaurants and other areas in the hotel on fire.

"I'm going home, I'm going to see my wife," said Mark Abell, after emerging from the hotel. Abell, from Britain, had locked himself in his room during the siege. "These people here have been fantastic, the Indian authorities, the hotel staff. I think they are a great advertisement for their country," he said as he walked to the bus carrying the released hostages.

The Trident-Oberoi hotels are owned by the East India Hotels group. At a press conference, the vice-chairman of the group, S.S Mukherji, said Oberoi had been damaged more severely than the Trident.

NARIMAN HOUSE

AFP



Rabbi Gavriel Holtzberg and Rivka Holtzberg, who ran the Chabad-Lubavitch Jewish Community Centre in Mumbai. The couple's son, Zvi Moshe (below), was rescued by their maid from the attack on Nariman House.

THERE was nothing special about Nariman House until November 26 when three terrorists stormed into the Chabad centre there. The building was just another one in the crowded bylanes of Colaba market, one of the older parts of the city. Some of the buildings here are a hundred years old.

Nariman House was certainly old enough for its landlord to demolish the original structure and rebuild it. Initially a small structure (local people are not sure of the number of storeys), it was rebuilt to a height of five floors, taking advantage of the floor-space index allowances. The neighbouring buildings are still period houses and Nariman House towers over them all (except a new one which is still under construction). As is typical of old Mumbai construction, the buildings are crammed together and separated only by narrow municipal lanes.

AP



Nariman House is not on the main road – it is the fourth building set back in a lane. It was a matter of surprise that the Chabad centre would choose to buy property in a place that is not particularly upscale. The centre was set up about five years ago and was a meeting place for expatriate and local Jews. It offered a community prayer hall, rooms for rent and a place where festivals and holy days could be observed. Two floors of the building housed the Chabad-Lubavitch Jewish Community Centre.

The centre was run by a 29-year-old Rabbi, Gavriel Holtzberg, and his 28-year-old wife, Rivka. Both were of Israeli origin, but while Rivka grew up in Israel, Rabbi Gavriel's parents moved to Brooklyn, New York, when he was a child. The rabbi, his wife and a two-year-old child were the only permanent residents of the centre. Of the two floors of the building they occupied, one was a general area for community activities and the upper floor held rooms that were rented out to Jewish visitors. Given this scenario, it seemed an unlikely target for terrorists.

There is a consistency in the choice of the five locations that were targeted by the terrorists – the Taj hotel, the Oberoi-Trident hotels, the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, the Cama hospital and the Leopold Cafe were either Mumbai landmarks or places that were crowded, and promised a large number of foreigners.

Nariman House did not fit any of these criteria. It was chosen for just one reason, that is, its Jewish connection. There is no doubt that it was targeted because it housed the Chabad-Lubavitch Jewish Community Centre. The centre has deeply religious beliefs and a conservative outlook. It is likely that this aspect prompted it to be the terrorists' choice.

At around 9.30 p.m. on November 26, three gunmen forced their way into the Chabad centre and held its occupants hostage for 48 hours. The terrorists naturally had the advantage of surprise. No one was aware of the number of the terrorists within the house. Nor was any accurate figure of the number of residents of the house available. The Holtzbergs' house maid, Sandra Samuel, was far too disoriented from her ordeal to recall the exact number of people in the Chabad centre. When the attackers entered the house, she was with Zvi Moshe, the Holtzbergs' son. She hid herself and the child for the night and the next morning she managed to slip out, barefoot and dishevelled, to be escorted to safety by the police. The only information she provided on the spot was that the child's parents were both unconscious and another person was badly injured. "Get help to them please," was her repeated request.

A joint operation by Mumbai Police personnel and commandos of the NSG ended tragically on November 28 at 10 p.m. Immediately after the conclusion of what the NSG had named Operation Black Tornado, eight bodies were counted – four Israelis, one commando and three terrorists. Later reports apparently took the count up, but confirmation of this was not available.

Likewise, there were unofficial reports that two of the women had apparently been dead for many hours before the centre was stormed. The reason of death was not clear. Unconfirmed reports also say that the bodies of two men were found tied together. How and when they died was not known. It is the first time that Jews have been targeted in India. The Jewish community has never faced prejudice or violence in India, and though the root of the attack was in India, it was carried out by foreign nationals.

COLABA CARNAGE

PTI



Relatives mourn the death of Hidayutulla Kazi, who was killed in the attack on Leopold Cafe.

"WE heard sounds of firing for at least 15 minutes and then suddenly it was quiet. When they opened the shutters, we saw bodies and blood splattered all over the road. Since I am a doctor, I rushed out and picked up whoever I could, put them in a taxi and rushed to St. George Hospital," said Dr. Akash Akinwar.

Akinwar was having dinner at Olympia, a well-known restaurant at Colaba, when terror struck. He said the owner downed the main shutter of the shop immediately after the gunshots were heard and told the diners to lie on the floor. Olympia is just opposite Leopold Cafe, a bar and eatery on Colaba Causeway that is popular with tourists. Pradhan, 25, left his post as the doorman of Leopold Cafe for 10 minutes to buy *supari*. "*Mein vapas aaya to poora badan kaap ne laga. Kabhi itna khoon nahi dekha* (When I returned I started shaking uncontrollably. I had never seen so much blood in all my life)," he recalled. He said he heard the firing but presumed they were crackers. He was surprised at the audacity of the militants to carry out the carnage right in front of the Colaba police station.

As two terrorists armed with AK-47s stood at the entrance and sprayed bullets into the large room, there was not much the people in the packed cafe could do. The layout is such that there is really no place to hide, and the tightly crowded tables make it impossible to dive for cover. Six customers and two waiters died.

Leo's, as the cafe is popularly referred to, was the first place to be hit in the series of terror attacks. Photographs of shattered glass, smashed furniture and pools of coagulated blood have stunned Mumbaikars. The cafe's owner, Farhang S. Jehani, is determined to get it back to normal as soon as possible. He said he aimed to be open for business within two days of the city returning to normal.

Leopold Cafe, which was started in 1871 as a wholesale oil store, is now a pub and is idolised in Gregory David Robert's bestseller *Shantaram*. Lonely Planet's quote on it is worth reproducing: "Drawn like moths to a Kingfisher flame, most tourists end up at this Mumbai traveller's institution at one time or another."

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