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Terror, Step By Step

Just how did ten terrorists attack multiple targets in quick succession? **RANA AYYUB** captures the prolonged battle in Mumbai

IN THE end, the terror alerts stayed on paper. The men who walked ashore in South Mumbai's posh Gateway of India area in dark clothes, need not have worried. There was little about them — trained as one of them now reveals to wage hightech urban jihad and navigate the high seas — that gave away any sign of the high-risk task they were an hour away from executing.

They had already set their plan into motion when they mercilessly killed Amar Sinh Solanki, the captain of Al Kuber, a fishing trawler they had used to complete the second leg of their journey which began on November 24, 48 hours before they drifted ashore on an inflatable speedboat called Gemini. The journey can be pieced through the account of Kasav, the class four dropout from Pakistan's Punjab; the short, young face captured



by CCTV cameras. Kasav and nine others — who were subsequently to be killed — sailed from Azizabad in Karachi on a small ship and soon hopped on to Al Hussein, a Pakistani vessel stationed about 200 nautical miles from the port of Karachi. Kuber was the next vessel they hopped on to, to close in on Mumbai; the terror destination they had been trained to attack. En route, four of Solanki's colleagues were killed and thrown into the deep circling waters of the Arabian Sea. Whether their bodies will ever be found is only a matter of small detail to the investigators.



Terror on schedule Two terrorists captured on camera while entering CST

Solanki still had use for Kasav and his men and they blindfolded him, tied his legs and ruthlessly slit his throat only after they could make out the Mumbai skyline with its skyscrapers in the distance.

They had sailed past the coast guards, past the Naval lines of defence and now that Mumbai was only a speedable four to five nautical miles away, they, indeed, had little worry. Jannat was the last stop in their motivated, indoctrinated heads and as they walked ashore, only kilometers away from their intended mayhem, it was easy to brush off Ajay Mistry, one of the many eyewitnesses of what was to unfold for the next 60 hours.

MISTRY RECALLS seeing six men get off at the fishermen's coast in the Cuffe Parade area near Sassoon dock. He remembers them being dressed smartly in navy blue and black. They appeared to be in their early twenties, like college kids, Mistry recalled. Another eyewitness, a teenager who came out of his house where he had been engrossed watching the 'gentleman's game' — the India vs England match — says there were few people outdoors that day because of the batball duel. He asked the young men what they were doing there, to which one of them said they were college students and had just come back from a boat ride. Another eyewitness, Anita Rajendra Udaayar was told, "*apna kaam karo*" (do your work), when she queried, asking them what they were doing there. Men with oversized backpacks strapped on their backs was an unusual sight even for the residents accustomed to tourists taking boat rides.

Ironically, few will argue now that the ease with which they came, undetected, resembled a boat ride.

Mistry recalls the time he saw the men — 8.30 pm is what he puts it at. An hour later — in which more people had stepped out of their homes as diners — two gunmen with AK 47s, deadly assault rifles that kill in bursts, walked into the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST). Making no pretense of concealing the Kalashnikovs, the two — they now have names: Kasav and Abu Ismail — walked on to platform number 13, also close to the entrance of the railway station.

CST was their first port of call and they fired with gusto and sprayed death, firing randomly at the passengers on the crowded platform. Chaos ensued as shouts, screams and wails engulfed the platform. Those who survived the bursts ran around in panic, not knowing what had hit them. Anand Shelgaonkar, a cleaner at the station, then saw one of the two terrorists lob a hand grenade right in the middle of the station. A splinter or a bullet — it was too chaotic to tell — hit the chest of a railway employee whose job it was to announce train arrivals and departures.

But where was the railway police? Security at stations was supposed to have been beefed up after the serial train blasts in Mumbai on July 11, 2006 had killed almost a similar number — 187.

Rajendra Sadashiv, a constable who had just come in on the night shift, now gives an eyewitness account in answer to that crucial question. "They looked like army *wallas*. They wore dark clothers and carried guns just like the army does, and so no one suspected them. But when they started firing, my senior, Inspector Shashank Shinde, tried to counter them and started firing at

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them, but they fired back at him. He was killed on the spot. They also fired at me and though I was not hit, I fell down in a pool of blood. Because of the chaos, they assumed I was dead and went past me firing at others. They did all this in complete silence. Nobody uttered a word, they just coordinated with each other through hand movements and sign language.”

THE POLICE out of their way, the merchants of death went about their cold business. They had claimed 40 lives in a matter of minutes and it was time to move on. They had other destinations to go to. Eleven-year-old Vilas, who polished shoes at the station for a living, jumped to safety behind a board when he saw one of the terrorists with a big gun, and realised it was not some gangwar or underworld encounter. This was not sniper fire. It was coming in bursts.

Walking out of the station, Kasav and Ismail walked past the *Times of India* building to enter Cama Hospital. Vilas surveyed the scene from behind the board. He could only see bodies, pools of blood and heaps of clothes that had fallen out of the passengers suitcases. Forty deaths later, the police had not yet arrived. The Crisis Management Group (CMG), supposed to kick in within minutes of an attack (during the hijacking crisis when IC 814 finally landed in Kandahar, the CMG had re-rehearsed the drill after it failed to stop the plane at Amritsar) was nowhere in evidence. The patients — mostly women and children — were at the mercy of the men in deep blue and black. So were the hospital's security guards, who were easily felled with bullets.

One of the terrorists — it is not clear which one — came rushing down the fourth floor when he was told that a police jeep was making its way to the hospital. This was the first sign that the terrorists were also carrying phones (a probe is now on on how they obtained SIM cards which got activated so quickly. There are conflicting reports of the SIMs having come from Vienna and New York and another of them being from Delhi and West Bengal.) Then, it didn't matter which numbers they were using. All that mattered was that they could communicate and so were able to shoot dead ATS chief Hemant Karkare, encounter specialist Vijay Salaskar and ACP Ashok Kamte. Mumbai's three top cops died before they had a chance to pick up their guns. Arun Jadhav, a constable who took four bullets and fell down, given up as dead, was to soon emerge as an important eyewitness.

JADHAV TELLS a chilling account of what the two did after throwing the bodies of Karkare, Salaskar and Kamte out of the Qualis in which they lay slumped. According to Jadhav, who is now recuperating in an intensive care unit, the two took control of the vehicle and started driving towards the Metro theatre junction, all the time indiscriminately firing at the people on the road. The policemen standing on the other side of the road initially thought that their officers were in the Qualis; only to realise quickly that it had been hijacked. In the midst of the firing, there was another loud sound — this one signaled that the Qualis itself had a tyre burst. Unfazed, the foot didn't come off the accelerator till a parked Skoda with four men in it came in handy. Seeing the men cocking AKs, the four leapt out of the Skoda and offered to surrender themselves but, Kasav and his accomplice seemed like men in a hurry. Khedkar, a police sub-inspector was by now following the terrorists. He quickly took the number of the Skoda from the four who could not believe their luck, and passed it on to the control room. When a police post tried to stop the car near Girgaum Chowpatty, Ismail, who was in the driving seat, tried taking a sharp U-turn. He hit a median and this gave the police their chance of finally opening up. In the duel between the .303 and the AK 47s, one policeman, Tukaram Umbale, was killed and so was Ismail. According to Khedkar, they had also assumed Kasav to be dead, but discovered on reaching the hospital that while he had been injured, the bullets had only grazed him. Kasav was to be the only one who would survive the 60-hour battle that he had begun at CST.

Kasav could only have wondered about what the others — they had broken up into pairs after getting off the speed boat — were up to. Unknown to him, at roughly the same time as the CST shootout, two other gunmen were standing at the entrance to Leopold Café, one of South Mumbai's open air beer and snacks joint that attracts both locals and foreign tourists alike. It was business as usual at the Café and a waiter invited the two in. Their backpacks were larger than most, but that is now hindsight. Surveying the restaurant that was set up way back in 1871, the two nodded to the waiter, and seconds later, opened fire on



diners who nibbled on food as they watched the cricket match play itself out on television. Mehmood Patel, who was standing outside the Leopold, remembers the two terrorists casually walking out of the Café and taking the lane for Taj Hotel, only a stone's throw away.

CST had been hit. Maharashtra's top cops lay dead, their bodies strewn outside a hospital. Kasav and Ismail had driven around South Mumbai and now Leopold was to count its dead. The country's financial capital was under siege. Multiple targets were being hit. Where was the police? What was their assessment? Had somebody informed the Home Ministry, the National Security Advisor, the Prime Minister?

The state was not in control, the men who had come aboard Al Kuber were.

The two who walked down the lane to Taj were going to catch up with two others who had already begun the dance of death in the up-market five star hotel. Vasant Prabhu, a Press photographer who had come to Leopold, thinking it was one more case of firing in a city accustomed to underworld duels, saw one of the terrorists entering the Taj. He followed and found Nagre Patil, a district commissioner of police (DCP), entering the hotel with a bodyguard and two security men. He recounted what he saw, "When we reached the first floor the terrorists had already started firing. We somehow managed to reach the third floor. The DCP, who had just a service revolver, was cautious and tried to peep over the wall from the third to the second floor. A gunman saw us, shouted 'Bastards' and opened fire. We ducked and fell on the floor and started creeping towards the staircase."

TOO MANY targets were being hit at the same time. Also at about 9.30pm, two gunmen, one slightly plump, threw a hand grenade at the Bharat Petroleum gas station at the Colaba Causeway next to the Israeli-owned Chabad House, better known as Nariman House. Vicky Patil, who owns a sweet shop nearby, was surprised by how the two went straight for their target. "A common man would have had difficulty in finding the place, but these people knew every lane as if they had studied the entire place." The Chabad House, run by Rabbi Gavriel Holtzberg, provided solace not just to Israelis across the world and in the country, but also to locals. On hearing the hand grenade explode, the Rabbi had called the police, but the terrorists had managed to enter Nariman House by then and took all nine of them hostage. The Rabbi's two-year-old son, however, was lucky. His maid had taken him to safety. Investigators probing the Mumbai madness now believe that the terrorists killed the nine hostages one by one. Vicky Patil also helped bring the bodies out, and says they were totally decomposed, confirming what the NSG Director JK Dutt was to say later — the hostages were all dead before the commandos went in to engage the terrorists holed up in three different locations — Taj, Oberoi and Nariman House.

BUT THE commandos were to arrive only an entire night after the bullets had been fired at chosen targets. The NSG had been tasked only two hours after the attack first began and they would land in Mumbai at 5am the next morning, board buses that took an hour-long journey into South Mumbai. The fire power of the terrorists was by then tested by the Marine Commandos (MARCOS), and they had to retreat after groping in the dark, stumbling over dead bodies littered in the rooms and the corridors.

The Taj had been stormed through its front entrance. The pair that walked up from Leopold barged in through a side door. The hotel management had been sensitised to the possibility of an attack and security had been beefed up — and removed due to the inconvenience caused to its guests.

The four unexpected, unwelcome guests who arrived on the night of November 26, fired indiscriminately in the lobby, sending guests and staff scurrying. The Taj was the last site to be cleared and for a good three days, four men held the vast building with 565 rooms, hostage. They had their AKs and hand grenades with which to keep the commandos at bay. They also liberally poured booze from the minibars in the rooms onto carpets and curtains. The smoke was an effective tool to stall the advancing soldiers.

Oskari Polcho, a young 19-year-old, was one of the residents at the hotel. He was coming out of a room on the second floor when he saw the terrorist firing at anyone they could spot. Before he could grasp what was happening, he saw a gun being aimed at him. Two bullets hit him — one lodged itself in his hand and the other in his pelvis. “The terrorist thought I was dead and proceeded to the other rooms. I lay there bleeding till one of the commandos knocked at my room,” a shivering Polcho recounted.

Another pair had entered the Oberoi, shot at the front desk and moved to their left to Tiffin, a popular restaurant. A second volley was fired here. They then moved to Kandahar, where other guests were dining. The restaurant manager saw them coming and tried to shut open the door. They shot the door, entered the restaurant, took about 17 people hostage and forced a restaurant employee to set Kandahar on fire before ordering their hostages all the way up to the 20th floor. Somewhere in the middle of all this, one of the guests managed to call his wife to say there had been a shootout at the hotel. She regrets not telling him she loved him. That was the last time they spoke. He was one amongst those who were forced to line up against a wall in the corridor before being mowed down. Before they were killed, one of them wanted to know why they were doing this to them. Have you not heard of Babri Masjid (demolished in 1992) and have you not heard of Godhra (a reference to the 2002 carnage in Gujarat) was the cryptic reply. The terrorists, one at the head of the queue and the other at the tail, had only to press the trigger.

SUNIL KUMAR, an NSG commando who was on the second floor with Major Sandeep Unnikrishnan (later killed), was one of the first few to encounter the terrorists. He thought he had heard noises from Room 271. “They don’t sound like they are coming from civilians.” He was right. The door opened, a silhouette with a gun appeared, opened fire and retreated into the room. Three bullets hit him and the Major now had to escort him to safety. Major Unnikrishnan did that but lost touch with the other men in his team. He had a tiny radio in his ear and could contact his officers but to establish contact with his team mates (the commandos work in batches) he had to call out. The minute he did that, he gave his position away. A terrorist was lurking close by and it didn’t take him a minute to spot the Major. He, like Kasav and the others, had been trained for close to a year.

The MARCOS who came in before the NSG could do little. They could not even gain access to the CCTV room because of the billowing smoke. Trained in diving and underwater operations, they were at sea in the labyrinth of the Taj hotel, quite unlike the four terrorists who appeared to know each stairwell and all its multiple entries and exits.

KASAV’S ACCOMPLICES kept the MARCOS and the NSG commandos on their toes for nearly 60 hours; the NSG chief conceding that they had to keep changing their strategies. Landing on the roof was only the beginning of a long ordeal. Manoeuvring the floors and the rooms, especially where frightened guests had locked themselves in, was nerve wracking for people on both sides of the door. The NSG commandos did not know how many terrorists were roaming the floors in the dark, like they were. Checking each room was a tension-filled and time-consuming task. None of the guests holed up in their rooms responded to the knock on the door. They didn’t know who was knocking. The calls of ‘we have come to help you,’ sent guests behind writing desks and into bathrooms. Each room was opened with a spare key and it was only after Dutt gave the thumbs up sign at Taj and Oberoi did they realise that 200 of them had spent the better part of three days neutralising six militants in these two locations.

Nariman House, too, was held hostage by just two men. The police had evacuated nearby buildings as terrorists opened fire from the window, killing bystanders of the Nariman House. Later, commandos jumped out of helicopters and slithered down ropes to land on the roof, but the Rabbi and his wife had already been killed. Other bodies were found with bullets on their foreheads — they had been shot at close range.

The eight men — four at the Taj, two at the Oberoi and two at Nariman House, were not looking for escape routes. Several

kilograms of meat that lay in Nariman House looked untouched. The terrorists had brought their own ration — high protein dry fruit. They had come to kill and to add numbers to the list of fatalities. The last official count is 198 dead.

This does not include four guests who had been been marched up to the 20th floor from the Kandahar restaurant at the Oberoi. They had fallen amongst the heap of bodies, where they lay injured, not dead, only to relive the horror of the long siege.

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