

Mumbai terror attacks: Nightmare in the lap of luxury

The terrorist rampage that gripped the world for three days began in silence as eight killers stepped from a boat on to a dark city beach. Now India demands to know who they were, where they came from ... and most of all, why the security forces failed to prevent them

Gethin Chamberlain in Mumbai

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From the moment a small boat nudged the shore of Mumbai's Fisherman's Colony on Wednesday evening and decanted eight young men clad in orange anoraks, the plan was simple: kill and keep killing to the very last breath.

The little group paused to shed their waterproof jackets, revealing jeans and T-shirts. Picking up their bulging rucksacks from the black inflatable, they turned silently and set off towards the heart of India's financial capital.

The beach was virtually empty, most of the residents of the area having retreated indoors to watch the final stages of the one-day cricket match between India and England. India won, but it was the last piece of good news the country would have until yesterday morning when Mumbai was finally freed from the grip of an audacious terrorist outrage that claimed the lives of at least 195 people.

For 62 hours, the gunmen roamed freely around some of the city's most prestigious hotels, killing at random, holding Mumbai and the wider world in horrified thrall.

Despite the lure of the cricket, one man had ventured out onto the beach on Wednesday evening. Bharat Tamore, an assistant supervisor at the Taj Mahal Palace hotel, was gazing out to sea when he spotted the dinghy drifting

noiselessly towards the beach.

It was 9.15pm and by the light of the moon Tahore watched the men jump off. They were young, no more than 25, thin and good-looking, 'like Bollywood stars,' he recalled later, although their faces wore a grim, determined look. On their backs were blue rucksacks, and in their hands red carry-bags heavy enough to cause one of the smaller men to stumble. They were students, they said, when he asked what they were doing: 'They told me that they were tense and that they didn't need any more tension.'

The young men slipped away into the night in the direction of the Taj Mahal Palace and the ornate splendour of the Gateway of India.

But they were not the only ones on the move. Across the southern tip of the city, others were also collecting weapons and heading out to get the carnage under way. How many there were, no one seems quite sure: as many as 40, some sources suggested.

The key questions are what they intended to achieve in their murderous rampage, their identities, and who sent them to Mumbai. Answers are likely to come in the first instance from one of those who clambered out of the inflatable on Wednesday night - 21-year-old Mohammad Ajmal Mohammad Amin Kasab - the only terrorist known to have been captured alive by Indian security forces. As details of his interrogation were disclosed yesterday in the Indian media, the first proper understanding of what happened in three days of bloodshed began to emerge out of the contradictory details - building a case that pointed ever more strongly towards Pakistan. It is not just the Indian media who are saying out loud what many suspected, but also state officials. What they had only hinted at in the beginning - with Kasab's interrogation - was yesterday stated more boldly. '[The] investigation carried out so far has revealed the hand of Pakistan-based groups in the Mumbai attack,' said Sri Prakash Jaiswal, India's Minister of State for Home Affairs.

As Kasab left the docks, it was in the company of a man the police say has been identified as Ismail Khan, the terrorists splitting into pairs of small kill teams.

The journey that followed across Mumbai - described in the Indian press - took the two men first by taxi to the CST

railway station, where Kasab was chillingly photographed as he paused, amid the gunfire and grenades that killed as many as 50 people, in grey combat trousers, a dark blue T-shirt and wearing a rucksack with spare ammunition on one shoulder.

From the railway station Khan and Kasab moved on to the Cama and GT hospitals, firing as they went. According to the same sources, it was during their progress through Mumbai that the pair shot dead the Anti-Terrorism Squad chief Hemant Karkare and another senior officer. Their killing spree was only halted when Khan was shot down in the Girgaum Chowpatty locality of south Mumbai, and when Kasab surrendered.

Now Kasab is talking, and what he has to say is likely to define the future relations of two nuclear-armed rivals - India and Pakistan. Yesterday a Pakistani official said it would divert troops to its border with India and away from fighting militants on the Afghan frontier, if tensions erupt in the wake of the attacks on Mumbai. That the tensions will increase in the coming days seems likely.

Already, if the accounts of his questioning are to be believed, Kasab has revealed that, like him, most of his fellow attackers hailed from Pakistan - although that has yet to be confirmed. He revealed that the group had been planning the attack for months. Some are thought to have taken jobs in the targeted hotels, others had checked in as guests a few days earlier, using their rooms to stockpile weapons. Kasab - from Faridkot in Pakistan - and eight others had visited Mumbai a few months earlier, posing as students and taking a room in the Colaba market area, which they used as a safe-house to store the supplies they would need for the attacks. According to police, Kasab told them that the main planner arrived in Mumbai a month ago to film potential targets to help train the gunmen. Once he was satisfied that they were ready, the boat team members were each issued with an AK-47 rifle, a pistol, 350 bullets and eight hand-grenades.

A recovered GPS device suggested they set out from the Pakistani port of Karachi in a larger boat - though such is the friction between the two countries that such reports have to be treated with caution - before overpowering the crew of another vessel and sailing to within four nautical miles of Mumbai. There, they transferred to speedboats and made for the shore. So began a night of terror.

Even as Kasab and Khan were attacking the CST station, another pair of gunmen hit the the Leopold Café, a popular

haunt for backpackers. Witnesses described how the gunmen took weapons out of backpacks and hurled grenades, killing at least one person. More gunmen moved through the area in a hijacked police vehicle, firing indiscriminately.

At Nariman House, the attackers went for a Jewish centre run by Rabbi Gavriel Holtzberg, and his wife Rivka. The couple's son Moshe, two, was rescued by his nanny. They were the only survivors.

But the images of horror that will forever be associated with one of India's darkest days were reserved for elsewhere - the imposing Oberoi and Taj Mahal Palace hotels, frequented by Western business travellers and well-heeled Indians. Here it was the restaurants that took the brunt of the initial assault, but the terrorists quickly fanned out to round up more hostages. At the Taj, the first shots were fired near the swimming pool before the gunmen swarmed into the hotel.

It was in the Taj that a sinister new element to the attack emerged. Survivors said the gunmen were particularly interested in British and American guests, singling them out as targets and ignoring other nationalities. Guests scattered in panic as the carnage continued. 'There were people getting shot in the corridor. There was someone dead outside the bathroom,' said 28-year-old Australian former Neighbours actress Brooke Satchwell.

Bharat Tamore had reached the hotel only a few minutes earlier. Changing into his uniform ready for the night shift, he heard gunshots coming from the fashionable Shamiana restaurant above. 'I stepped out and saw staff and guests running. It was then I remembered those eight boys,' he said.

Paralysed by fear, he crouched with staff in the kitchen, listening to the crump of explosions and crackle of machine-gun fire until 4am, when they made a dash for freedom.

At the Oberoi, Madhu Kumar, 58, had sat down to a meal with her husband Ashok, 65, and two friends. Panic spread through the room as a gunman burst in, herding them up the stairs. 'He had a scarf like a bandana and a scarf on his mouth and he was carrying a machine gun,' she said. 'There was a stampede. We had heard a commotion and a lot of loud firing. Everybody got panicky. I saw a girl with a bleeding arm. She had been shot.'

She noticed that the gunman was quite fair-skinned and spoke in English - he was a Kashmiri, perhaps, she said. As

they moved up the stairs, she heard a gunshot behind her. 'This man was shot by a terrorist behind us. The terrorist said "wait", and I heard the shot and he fell. They were just shooting people at random.'

Caught on the hop and hopelessly outgunned, police struggled to cope. The first team to respond consisted of just eight members of the Mumbai force, each armed with a revolver. It took until 2am for the first military personnel to arrive, a group of 40 Marine commandos summoned from their beds to go to the Taj. Even then, no one was able to give them any information about the layout of the hotel. They did not know the strength of their opponents or what weapons they possessed. Entering the hotel, they found about 15 bodies, but before they could do anything else the terrorists opened fire and hurled grenades. By the time the firing stopped, the gunmen had slipped away into the maze of corridors and passageways in the old building.

Now in the aftermath that has left almost 200 dead - perhaps more in the final counting - it is not simply the question of who sent Kasab and his fellow gunmen to Mumbai that is exercising a shocked India. After three days of combat in which a handful of highly trained and motivated gunmen held off against massively superior Indian forces before being at last overwhelmed, what India wants to know is how its security forces could have been caught so flat-footed yet again, when they should have been at the highest state of vigilance after a series of murderous attacks around the country this year.

How, too, some asked, had they failed so dramatically to bring the situation under control during the best part of three days?

Sitting in a side street listening to the sound of loud blasts and gunfire emanating from Nariman House, Rakash Bhaud, the local leader of the far-right Hindu party Shiv Sena, blamed the central government for the failures that, he said, had left them at the mercy of Pakistan-backed terrorists.

'There is a deep anger here against the government for not providing security for the common people,' he said. 'The extremists have taken advantage of this. We don't have the security to fight against this.'

If the attackers' intention was to stir up tensions between India and Pakistan - and by extension, Hindu and Muslim - they most certainly succeeded. Anti-Pakistan slogans were being chanted freely by the crowds who gathered to

watch the storming of Nariman House.

As the firing died away yesterday morning, the work of getting the city back on its feet began. In the restaurant at the Oberoi hotel, staff were starting to sweep the broken glass away from the tables on which meals abandoned by the fleeing guests still lay. But it may take a lot longer to sweep away the memories of the events of last week and the old enmities it has stirred up.

For now, however, it is a moment for India to come to terms with what has happened. 'I had arranged to meet a friend in the Oberoi Trident lobby on Wednesday night,' said Malani Agarwal, 31, a radio presenter on Mumbai Radio. 'He said he was coming late, so I went upstairs to a lounge bar called the Dragon Fly which is a few doors away. Then we saw a lot of "fireworks" in the lobby. Ten minutes later we felt a tremor. That was the first grenade, then another one. People started getting texts about a gang war at Leopold's Café and then the Oberoi. The Dragon Café has bulletproof glass and you could see bullets lodged in the windows. That was really scary. We put the television onto the news and saw the Taj burning. The army coming. We all just felt numb. Too scared to move really. It was the worst night of my life. This will be a wake-up call.'

● Additional reporting: **Randeep Ramesh**

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