



Survivor Tells How He Escaped Gunmen In Mumbai

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Coordinated attacks by gunmen in Mumbai, India, have left scores of people dead and hundreds wounded. Host Michele Norris talks with one man who was eating dinner in the Taj Mahal Hotel when it was attacked but was able to make a harrowing escape.

MICHELE NORRIS, host:

From NPR News, this is All Things Considered. I'm Michele Norris. Commandos battled to free hostages in Mumbai, India today. Details remain sketchy one day after heavily armed men launched coordinated assaults on India's commercial capital. Today, Indian forces mobilized to take back control of two luxury hotels and a Jewish center, all places where hostages were being held. According to police, at least 119 people have been killed. More than 300 are wounded. And while the true identity of the attackers remains unknown, the Indian prime minister blamed militants from outside India. In a moment we'll hear analysis of that claim.

First, we're going to hear from someone who lived through the attacks. Kunal Merchant(ph) is a 24-year-old business man. Yesterday, he was

celebrating his father's 50th birthday at a restaurant inside the Taj Hotel when the firing started.

Mr. KUNAL MERCHANT: We heard shots being fired in the passageway. At first, I had never heard gun shots before, so I didn't know what it was. I thought some waiter had dropped a tray, and he had dropped some wine bottles after that.

But there were six or seven shots fired after that and through the passageway. I mean, the restaurant is separated by a frosted glass with the passage. And so, I could see the shots being fired after that, so I knew something was wrong. And after that, we were taken back - to the back of the restaurant and asked to sit under our tables just to be safe.

NORRIS: And you stayed under your tables for how long?

Mr. MERCHANT: For about 20 minutes and then the staff of the hotel evacuated us to another level inside the hotel. I think it was the fourth floor where there was no firing or there was no bombs going off. And they thought it would be much safer for us to be there.

NORRIS: Did you actually see the attackers?

Mr. MERCHANT: No, I did not. I saw people being attacked. I did see people being shot, and I think two people lost their lives in front of me, but I didn't see the attackers.

NORRIS: Were they shooting at specific people, or were they just randomly firing at people inside the hotel?

Mr. MERCHANT: Well, again, I didn't see these people, but I can only assume that they were shooting randomly at people because we were

hearing screams from everywhere and gunshots being fired in series. I mean, if you're targeting certain people, you would fire one shot. You wait. You fire another shot. You take your time to aim at them, but there were bullets being fired everywhere.

NORRIS: Well, how did you eventually get out of the hotel?

Mr. MERCHANT: I think the Indian military, they managed to fight off the terrorists back to a certain point and keep them restrained so we could be evacuated safely away from the Taj.

NORRIS: When you left the building, what happened at that point? Did they take you for any kind of debriefing or did you just head right home?

Mr. MERCHANT: No, they arranged a bus for us to take us from the Taj Hotel to a police station next to us. What happened at that point was, the terrorists started firing at the bus itself, so my parents and I got separated. So, they went in the first bus, and then I went in the second bus after the firing. And there was no kind of debriefing. We just had to wait there for our family members once we reached the police station and go home after that.

NORRIS: I must say, you sound incredibly calm in describing what sounds like an absolutely terrifying situation.

Mr. MERCHANT: I guess the shock has set in. I mean, I had not still come to terms with the fact that, you know, my life would have been taken or that I could have lost my life at one point.

NORRIS: You know, as you're back in your house surrounded by things that are familiar to you. Are you starting to process this? I'm just wondering, what does this mean for Mumbai and your country?

Mr. MERCHANT: I think we are entering a new era, where I think people will start to recognize terrorism now as a disease in society rather than as an inconvenience. And I hope that people take the right steps to stop this, that people are smart enough to get rid of this.

NORRIS: Well, Mr. Merchant, all the best to you and your family. Thank you very much for speaking with us.

Mr. MERCHANT: Thank you.

NORRIS: Kunal Merchant is a businessman in Mumbai, India. He says he plans to return to work tomorrow, in his words, to show the terrorists that they have been unsuccessful.

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Indian Commandos Still Battling Mumbai Gunmen

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In Depth

Indian Forces Continue Battle With Mumbai Gunmen
Nov. 27, 2008

Examining Who May Be Behind Mumbai Attacks Nov. 27, 2008

Death Toll Rises in Mumbai Attacks Nov. 27, 2008

Survivor Tells How He Escaped Gunmen In Mumbai

Government commandos in the Indian financial hub of Mumbai were still battling to wrest control of buildings and hotels seized by teams of gunmen in bloody attacks on Wednesday.

Indian sharpshooters opened fire early Friday

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at the site of a besieged Jewish center in Mumbai. Suspected militants were believed to be holed up — possibly with hostages — inside the headquarters of the ultra-orthodox Jewish outreach group Chabad Lubavitch. Snipers in buildings opposite the center began shooting as a helicopter circled overhead.

Earlier, an Israeli embassy official had said at least 10 Israeli nationals were trapped in buildings or held hostage in Mumbai.

At least 119 people had been killed and 288 wounded in a series of attacks that began Wednesday evening when the gunmen stormed at least 10 sites frequented by Western tourists and wealthy Indians — including the Jewish center, two luxury hotels, a popular restaurant, a train station, hospitals and a police station that controls security in the sector where the attacks were carried out.

'Still Not Under Control'

Officials said Thursday that the death toll from the attacks could rise.

"The situation is still not under control and we are trying to flush out any more terrorists hiding inside the two hotels," said Vilasrao Deshmukh, chief minister of Maharashtra state where Mumbai is located.

The Maharashtra state home ministry said dozens of hostages had been freed from the Trident-Oberoi hotel and dozens more were still trapped inside. More than 400 people were brought out of the Taj Mahal hotel, and army forces were still scouring the building for survivors Friday morning.

Late Thursday night, authorities said they had killed three gunmen at the

Taj and were sweeping the Oberoi in search of hostages and trapped people. It remained unclear just how many people had been taken hostage, how many were hiding inside the hotels and how many dead still lay uncounted.

Fears Of Renewed Tension With Pakistan

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh blamed militant groups based in neighboring countries, usually meaning Pakistan, raising fears of renewed tension between the nuclear-armed rivals.

"It is evident that the group which carried out these attacks, based outside the country, had come with single-minded determination to create havoc in the commercial capital of the country," he said in a televised address.

Pakistani authorities were quick to condemn the attacks, but Pakistan's defense minister warned Singh not to accuse Pakistan of links to the attacks.

"This will destroy all the goodwill we created together after years of bitterness," he told The Associated Press. "I will say in very categorical terms that Pakistan is not involved in these gory incidents."

On Thursday, the U.S. State Department warned U.S. citizens not to travel to Mumbai for 48 to 72 hours.

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