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Mumbai rocked by deadly attacks



Employees and guests of the Taj Mahal Palace hotel are rescued by fire crews

Gunmen have carried out a series of co-ordinated attacks across the Indian city of Mumbai (Bombay), killing 101 people and injuring 287 more.

At least seven high-profile locations were hit in India's financial capital, including two luxury hotels where dozens of hostages are being held.

The buildings are now ringed by troops. Gunmen are also said to be holding people captive in an office block.

Police say four suspected terrorists have been killed and nine arrested.

As day broke in Mumbai, the situation on the ground was still confused with reports of gunfire and explosions at between seven and 16 locations.

The city's main commuter train station, a hospital, a restaurant and two hotels - locations used by foreigners as well as local businessmen and leaders - were among those places caught up in the violence.

Commandos have surrounded the two hotels, the Taj Mahal Palace and the Oberoi Trident, where it is believed that the armed men are holding dozens of hostages.

In other developments:

- Fire crews evacuate people from the upper floors of the Taj Mahal Palace, where police say a grenade attack caused a blaze
- The head of Mumbai's anti-terrorism unit and two other senior officers are among those killed, officials say
- The White House holds a meeting of top intelligence and counter-terrorism officials, and pledges to help the Indian government
- Trading on India's Bombay Stock Exchange and National Stock Exchange markets will remain closed on Thursday, officials say.



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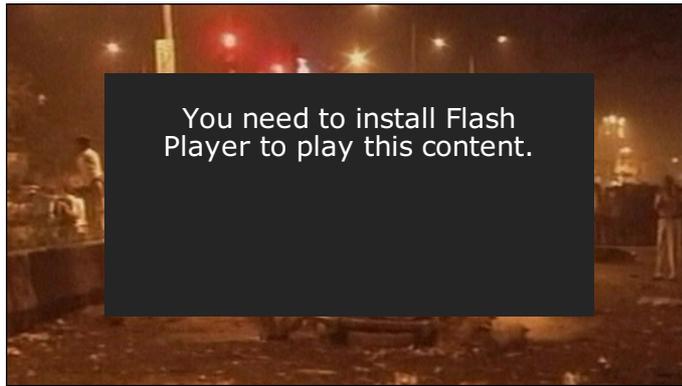
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Gunmen opened fire at about 2300 local time (1730 GMT) on Wednesday at the sites in southern Mumbai.



Eyewitness reaction and local TV footage from the scene

"The terrorists have used automatic weapons and in some places grenades have been lobbed," said AN Roy, police commissioner of Maharashtra state.

Local TV images showed blood-splattered streets, and bodies being taken into ambulances.

One eyewitness told the BBC he had seen a gunman opening fire in the Taj Mahal's lobby.

"We all moved through the lobby in the opposite direction and another gunman then appeared towards where we were moving and he started firing immediately in our direction."

One British tourist said she spent six hours barricaded in the Oberoi hotel.

"There were about 20 or 30 people in each room. The doors were locked very quickly, the lights turned off, and everybody just lay very still on the floor," she said.

A BBC correspondent outside the landmark Taj Mahal Palace said there were gunshots between police and the armed men, and that 11 officers were killed in the skirmishes.

Eyewitness reports suggest the attackers singled out British and American passport holders.

If the reports are true, our security correspondent Frank Gardner says it implies an Islamist motive - attacks inspired or co-ordinated by al-Qaeda.

A claim of responsibility has been made by a previously unknown group calling itself the Deccan Mujahideen.

Our correspondent says it could be a hoax or assumed name for another group.

The motive is far from clear - but the attacks come amid elections in several Indian states, including in disputed Kashmir.

On Thursday, reports said five gunmen had taken hostages in an office block in the financial district of Mumbai.

There has been a wave of bombings in Indian cities in recent months which has left scores of people dead.

Most of the attacks have been blamed on Muslim militants, although police have also arrested suspected Hindu extremists.

Mumbai itself has also been attacked in the past: in July 2006 a series of bomb attacks on busy commuter trains killed almost 190 people and injured more than 700

BOMB ATTACKS IN INDIA IN 2008	
◆	30 October: Explosions kill at least 64 in north-eastern Assam
◆	30 September: Blasts in western India kill at least seven
◆	27 September: Bomb blasts kills one in Delhi
◆	13 September: Five bomb blasts kill 18 in Delhi
◆	26 July: At least 22 small bombs kill 49 in Ahmedabad
◆	25 July: Seven bombs go off in Bangalore killing two people
◆	13 May: Seven bomb hit markets and crowded streets in Jaipur killing 63
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people and injured more than 700.

Police accused Pakistan's intelligence agency of planning those attacks, which they said were carried out by an Islamist militant group, Lashkar-e-Toiba.

Pakistan rejected the allegation, saying there was no evidence that its intelligence staff were involved.

But the latest shootings come at a time when ties between India and Pakistan have improved.

Just days ago Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari told a summit in Delhi that Pakistan would not be first to carry out a missile strike on India.

The two countries have a joint anti-terror mechanism whereby they are supposed to share information on terrorist attacks.



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