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Dozens die as terrorists take hostages



Fire engulfs the historic Taj Mahal Palace hotel in downtown Mumbai. Police were moving through the building room by room last night. Inset: A terrorist at Mumbai railway station.

Photo: *AFP*

Matt Wade in Mumbai
November 28, 2008

INDIA'S largest city has been paralysed by violence and fear.

The beaches on Mumbai's famous Marine Drive were deserted and the city's normally chaotic roads were empty last night as locals waited for a brazen terrorist siege to end.

Many people were still trapped inside two of the country's most luxurious hotels nearly 24 hours after terrorists armed with assault rifles and grenades attacked the country's financial hub killing more than 100 people and wounding about 300.

The police commissioner, A.N. Roy, said police and army commandos were moving through the five-star Taj Mahal Hotel room by room.

"Some dead bodies were lying inside; they have been brought out. This process is on," he told the news channel NDTV.

"There are guests in the rooms, but we won't be able to give you a number. There is no hostage-like situation in the Taj."

Soldiers and police were also moving on the luxury Trident Oberoi hotel in an operation to free the estimated 200 people trapped inside.

There were also thought to be hostages in the Jewish centre Nariman House, which had been surrounded by snipers.

Television signals to both hotels have been switched off to prevent the terrorists getting wind of any operations to storm the buildings.

It was reported that authorities had made contact with the terrorists, but Mr Roy said there were no negotiations.

One, possibly two, Australians died and two were confirmed injured. There were no reports of Australian hostages.

Police said the 20 to 30 terrorists who undertook the attack on Mumbai were highly trained and well armed. Several were aged in their early 20s, dressed in T-shirts and jeans and armed with automatic weapons and grenades.

They turned southern Mumbai into a war zone for many hours.

Even by the standards of terrorism in India, where there has been a spate of attacks this year, the assaults were particularly brazen and drastically different in scale and execution. The attackers used boats to reach the urban peninsula they hit, and their targets were sites popular with tourists.

Indian officials said the police had killed four of the suspected attackers and captured nine.

The Indian navy said its forces were boarding a cargo vessel suspected of ties to the terrorists. A navy spokesman, Captain Manohar Nambiar, said the ship, MV Alpha, had recently come to Mumbai from Karachi.

The Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, said those behind the attacks were based "outside the country" and he warned "neighbours" who provided a haven to anti-India militants.

The gunmen lay siege to two of the hotels all night. Troops stormed in to rescue people trapped inside. The 105-year-old Moorish-styled rooftop dome of the landmark Taj Mahal Palace & Tower hotel was engulfed in fire, and flames billowed out of many rooms. One wing of the waterfront hotel was gutted.

Hospitals were overwhelmed and sent out appeals for blood donations. Parts of the city remained under siege last night.

Guests were still trapped inside the 36-floor Oberoi Trident hotel, possibly as hostages. Commandos tried to storm the hotel and police battled the gunmen as hotel guests signalled to firemen from their room windows. Another hotel attacked was the Ramada, to the north.

A militant holed up inside the Oberoi Hotel told India TV yesterday morning that seven attackers were holding hostages there. "We want all Mujahideens held in India released, and only after that we will release the people.

"Muslims in India should not be persecuted. We love this as our country, but when our mothers and sisters were being killed, where was everybody?"

Two hostages from Turkey who were released because they were Muslim said they saw "countless" people shot in the room they were kept in on the 19th floor of the Oberoi Hotel, according to Debra Bayne, part of a NSW trade delegation who managed to hole up in her room on the same floor before police rescued them.

Some guests remained in hiding in the hotels, making mobile phone calls, some of them to television stations, describing their ordeal.

Alex Chamberlain, a Briton who was dining at the Oberoi, told Sky News that a gunman had ushered 30 or 40 people from the restaurant into a stairway and, speaking in Hindi or Urdu, ordered them to put up their hands.

"They were talking about British and Americans specifically," he recounted. "There was an Italian guy, who, you know, they said, 'Where are you from?' and he said he's from Italy, and they said, 'Fine,' and they left him alone."

Sajjad Karim, 38, a British member of the European Parliament, told Sky News: "A gunman just stood there spraying bullets around, right next to me."

Before his phone went dead, Mr Karim added: "I managed to turn away and I ran into the hotel kitchen and then we were shunted into a restaurant in the basement. We are now in the dark in this room, and we have barricaded all the doors. It's really bad."

Attackers had also entered Cama and Albless Hospital, and struck at or near Nariman House, home to an ultra-orthodox Jewish centre. Reuters reported that an Israeli family was being held hostage.

Several high-ranking law enforcement officials, including the chief of the anti-terrorism squad and a commissioner of police, were reported killed.

As a sense of crisis gripped much of the city, schools, colleges and the stock exchange were closed yesterday.

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