

Terrorist siege of Mumbai ends after 59 hours

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The siege of Mumbai finally ended today when Indian commandos killed three remaining gunmen still holed up in the luxury Taj Mahal Hotel. Mumbai police commissioner Hassan Gafoor told the media that all operations were over. Security personnel were still going room to room. One commando died in the final assault.

At least 160 civilians have been killed and over 320 injured since heavily-armed gunmen began their rampage through India's financial centre on Wednesday evening. Whoever was responsible, this slaughter of innocent civilians can only provide grist for reaction in India and around the world under the guise of the bogus "war on terrorism".

The first target was the Chhatrapati Shivaji railway station, where at least two men fired automatic weapons and threw grenades indiscriminately into the crowded main hall. The Café Leopold, a well-known venue for young foreigners, was attacked, followed by Nariman House, which houses the Chabad-Lubavitch centre. The Cama and Alpbless hospital for women and children was struck followed by the Taj Mahal Hotel and the five-star Oberoi-Trident Hotel. Several drive-by shootings also took place.

The attacks by as many as two dozen terrorists were well-planned and coordinated, according to Indian police and security officials. Every 15 minutes or so, a new target would be hit, creating maximum chaos and confusion to throw the security forces off guard. In a TV interview yesterday, a senior marine commando officer said that the gunmen knew the layout of the Taj Mahal Hotel better than his own men. He described the group as "very determined" and claimed that arms and explosives had been smuggled into the hotels ahead of the attacks.

By yesterday afternoon, Indian security forces had regained control of the Oberoi-Trident Hotel and escorted more than 100 guests to safety. Police and commanders found at least 36 bodies as they secured the premises. Two gunmen who had held the army at bay for nearly two days were killed. Yesterday evening, Indian commandos stormed the Jewish fundamentalist Chabad-Lubavitch centre, killing two terrorists. Five hostages,

including an American rabbi and his Israeli wife, were found dead.

Details of events remain sketchy. Yesterday evening, Union Minister of State for Home Sriprakash Jaiswal warned that the final death toll could reach 200. While initial reports indicated that the gunmen were specifically targeting US and British citizens, the dead so far included two French nationals, three Germans, an Italian, a Japanese, two Australians, a Canadian and a Singaporean, as well as five Americans and two Britons. Overwhelmingly the victims were Indians, most of them gunned down at the Chhatrapati Shivaji railway station.

It is still unclear which organisation or organisations were responsible for the attacks. A previously unknown group calling itself the Deccan Mujahadeen claimed responsibility on Thursday. As in previous terrorist cases, the Indian government has immediately pointed the finger at Pakistan. Foreign minister Pranab Mukherjee told the media: "Preliminary evidence, prima facie evidence, indicates elements with links to Pakistan are involved."

Several Indian newspapers have published what they allege are details of police interrogations of three captured gunmen. According to the *Hindu*, a Pakistani national identified as Ajmal Amir Kamal has told police that he was a member of the armed Kashmiri separatist outfit Lashkar-e-Taiba. US officials also allege that Lashkar-e-Taiba, or another Kashmiri militia, Jaish-e-Mohammed, may have been involved. Lashkar-e-Taiba has issued a statement denying any responsibility.

The *Hindu* claimed that Kamal had told his interrogators that he and 11 others had left the Pakistani port of Karachi on a merchant ship, then hijacked a fishing boat in Gujarat to elude the Indian navy and coast guard in their approach to Mumbai. The Indian navy has stopped two Pakistani cargo ships, releasing one after finding nothing suspicious aboard. Security officials in Mumbai have displayed a small inflatable craft, which they claim was used by one group of gunmen to reach the shore.

At this stage, however, no evidence has been released that conclusively demonstrates what organisation was responsible.

The Pakistani government has vehemently denied any involvement in the attacks and appealed to India not to inflame tensions between the two countries. As a sign of good faith, Islamabad has acceded to New Delhi's request for the head of Pakistan's military intelligence—Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) chief Lieutenant-General Ahmed Shujaa Pasha—to fly to India to assist with the investigations.

In India for a scheduled visit, Pakistani foreign minister Mehmood Qureshi declared: "We are not responsible for this, nor is it in our interest to get involved in something like this." It is unlikely that the Pakistani government, which is confronting a profound economic crisis and, embroiled in a worsening war against Islamic militants in the border areas with Afghanistan, had a direct hand in the terror attacks. Far from antagonising New Delhi, Islamabad has been seeking to ease tensions with India. It appears that last weekend President Asif Ali Zardari overturned Pakistan's previous nuclear doctrine, which did not rule out a first strike.

It is possible, however, that dissident elements of the Pakistani ISI or military may have instigated the Mumbai attacks as a means of deliberately inflaming tensions with India and destabilising the already unstable Pakistani government. Sections of the army are deeply resentful over the government's support for the US occupation of Afghanistan and that, under the guise of "fighting terrorism", they are being directed to suppress anti-US insurgents in the border areas with Afghanistan. If this turns out to be the case, the horrific events in Mumbai will be yet another demonstration of the deeply destabilising impact and criminal role of US militarism across the region.

It is also possible that a Kashmiri separatist group such as Lashkar-e-Taiba was responsible for the attacks. Significantly, one of the gunmen in the Jewish centre appears to have phoned an Indian TV station yesterday to call for negotiations. "Are you aware how many people have been killed in Kashmir? Are you aware how your army has killed Muslims? Are you aware how many of them have been killed in Kashmir this week?" he asked.

While the actions of the Indian army in Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir in no way justify indiscriminate murder in Mumbai, decades of repression in the majority Muslim state have created deep wellsprings of anger and resentment that provide ready recruits for various Kashmiri separatist and Islamist organisations. Last Friday Indian authorities revised the death toll from the nearly two decades of insurgency upwards to more than 47,000 people. The Indian security forces are notorious for the extra-judicial killing, arbitrary detention and torture of suspected militants in Kashmir.

Last week, tensions again flared in the region as police and paramilitary soldiers clashed with protestors holding demonstrations against the second round of voting in state elections. The protests followed months of political conflict provoked by the Indian government's provocative granting of land for a Hindu shrine in Kashmir.

Finally, it cannot be ruled out that the Mumbai attacks are the work of Islamist groups based in India itself, which have been fostered by decades of discrimination against the country's large Muslim minority. The dependence of the Indian establishment on communalism is exemplified by the political rise of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) over the past two decades. Indian Muslims are among the poorest and most oppressed layers of the population and have been the target of communal pogroms led by the BJP and other Hindu fanatics.

Whoever was responsible for the events in Mumbai, the terrorist outrage has played directly into the hands of the extreme rightwing in India and internationally. The Indian press, business leaders and politicians are already demanding tough new anti-democratic measures in the name of combatting terrorism. BJP leader L.K. Advani immediately seized the opportunity to divert attention from revelations that Hindu extremists in the Indian army had been involved in terrorist bombings. The Indian security services, he declared, have become "preoccupied" with Hindu terrorists and had missed threats from Islamists.

At the same time, there is a danger that the terrorist attacks will lead to a dramatic escalation of tensions between South Asia's two nuclear armed rivals—India and Pakistan—each of which relies upon whipping up communalism to shore up its base of support. Following an attack on the Indian parliament building in December 2001 by Kashmiri separatists, the two countries massed troops and came to the brink of all-out war, before pulling back under international pressure. With an unstable regime in Pakistan and national elections due next year in India, the potential exists, in the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks, for a similar escalation.



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