

India under attack



Correction to this article

THE sheer scale and audacity of the assault were staggering. Gangs of well-armed youths attacked two luxury hotels, a restaurant, a railway station and at least one hospital. Gunfire and explosions rang through Mumbai overnight on November 26th-27th and through the next morning. As *The Economist* went to press, more than 100 people were reported to have been killed, and the toll seemed likely to rise. Several foreigners, including some from America, Japan and Britain, were among the dead. So were over a dozen policemen, including Mumbai's chief counter-terrorism officer. Up to 100 hostages, including selected American and British guests, were alleged to be held hostage inside a hotel.

Even in a city—and country—with a grim record of terrorist violence, these were extraordinary scenes. The attacks started at around 10.30pm on November 26th, when gunmen started shooting and throwing grenades at Mumbai's main Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus railway station. Television footage showed two men shooting at random as they drove through nearby streets in a stolen police jeep.

Around the same time, a bomb was reported to have exploded in a taxi parked near the city's main airport. More or less simultaneously, gunmen speaking Hindi and Urdu, the language of many north-Indian Muslims and of neighbouring Pakistan, stormed two hotels—the Taj Mahal and the Trident Oberoi—and Café Leopold, a restaurant popular with tourists. Police outside the Taj Mahal, India's most famous hotel, lapped by the Arabian Sea, said gunmen arrived there by inflatable dinghy. In the early hours, a gunfight erupted on Marine Drive, the scenic coastal road seen in so many Bollywood films, in which another Mumbai police chief was killed.

As dawn broke, flames were rising from the domed roof of the Taj Mahal. Navy and army commandos, who had retaken the hotel's lower floors and killed two terrorists, reported bodies in many rooms and perhaps half a dozen terrorists still living. A trickle of terrified employees and guests, some with gunshot wounds, continued to flee the building. One fugitive, Amit, a hotel-restaurant manager, said his chef had been hit by three bullets and many colleagues remained inside. A few badly injured survivors were wheeled from the hotel on brass luggage-trolleys. By midday on November 27th most of the hostages were reported to have been released from the hotel, although there were reports of further shooting.

Meanwhile at the nearby Trident Oberoi, as many as 100 hostages were reported still to be held. Gunfire and explosions were reported from the upper storeys of the building.

There seemed little doubt that the attackers were Muslim militants of some description, but their exact provenance was unclear. Responsibility was claimed by a previously little-known group called the Deccan Mujahideen. Speaking to Indian television by telephone, a gunman holding hostages in the Trident Oberoi demanded that Muslim prisoners, including those

captured in Kashmir, should be released from Indian jails. "Release all the mujahideens, and Muslims living in India should not be troubled," he said.

In the past five months India has suffered from a spate of Islamist militancy, with bomb-blasts in half a dozen cities, including Delhi, Bangalore and Jaipur. A home-grown Muslim terrorist group, the Indian Mujahideen, has been blamed for the spree, in which over 150 people were killed. In a chilling, 14-page admission of responsibility for the Delhi bombings in September, the Indian Mujahideen castigated the counter-terrorism efforts of Mumbai's police, and promised Mumbai's future "deadly attacks".

As India's first indigenous Muslim terrorist group—so they have often been described—the Indian Mujahideen are a worrying sign. They seem to have evolved from a decade-long campaign by Pakistan-based militants, including many fighting an insurgency in Kashmir, to incite India's 150m Muslims to revolt. These groups have been held primarily responsible for half a dozen major terrorist attacks in Mumbai in recent years. In 1993 local Muslim gangsters backed by Pakistan-based militants set off 13 near-simultaneous bomb-blasts in the city, killing more than 250 people. In 2006 another co-ordinated bombing spree on Mumbai's railway killed over 180 commuters. A Pakistan-based group, Lashkar-e-Toiba, was blamed at the time.

This week's attacks in Mumbai seemed different, however. Attacks by bands of gunmen on numerous targets, instead of the mere laying of bombs, and the seizure of so many hostages, led to speculation, unsupported by evidence, that local militants in India could not have mounted the attacks without considerable foreign help. And the targets chosen—world-famous hotels and Western tourists—were a new phenomenon for India, despite being a pattern familiar from attacks directed or inspired by al-Qaeda elsewhere in the world.

Al-Qaeda has often threatened to launch strikes in India. In 2006 Arab terrorists belonging to the organisation were foiled in an attempt to set off bombs in Goa, India's main destination for foreign tourists. Among the targets of the latest attacks was a Jewish religious centre in southern Mumbai which was reported to have been fired on by the gunmen. Police said that an Israeli rabbi and his family were among a group being held as hostages in a nearby apartment block.

Despite these worrying signs, Indian officials have so far resisted suggestions that Indian Muslims are being radicalised and joining a global *jihad*. Many refer approvingly to the observation of George Bush that Muslims from India have not in general turned up to fight the infidels on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. But security analysts have meanwhile despaired at the unpreparedness of India's security agencies to counter a domestic Islamist threat. Whether or not al-Qaeda was behind the latest attack, that happy complacency must now have ended.

India under attack. **The economist**, New York. Disponível em:

<http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=12708194>. Acesso em: 9 Nov. 2008.