

60 Hours of Terror – A Diary

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Wednesday, 25th November. Fourth day at Tübingen. The University seems to think that I'm fit material for the Poetikdozentur (professorship of poetics). I get the feeling that I'm here not as a novelist, but as an expert on extremism and terrorism from Interpol. This afternoon I have a workshop with Christoph Peters and Dr. Anil Bhatti with students who will grill us on these subjects. Moral of the story: Don't write a book called *God's Little Soldier*.

Back in the hotel at 6.00 p.m. Hooray, Christoph says I don't have to attend his presentation tonight, because I'm 'Deutsch-challenged' (I'm both delighted and unhappy, I liked Christoph's novel about Turkey, though I haven't read his book about the terrorist in Egypt), but I have still to turn up to shake hands with the Mayor of Tübingen. Switched on the TV, or rather Channel 23, which is CNN. No other English channels in the hotel. A moving caption at the bottom of the screen about Taj Mahal Hotel. Too bad I missed it. Have to get dressed to leave for the meeting with the mayor. There it is again, "Gunshots heard at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai". Sounds like gangster stuff. Is it the men of Our Father, which art the mafia, hallowed be thy name, none other than Dawood Ibrahim who rules Bombay from Dubai and Pakistan?

9.30 p.m. I'm back, sitting in front of the TV, sandwich in hand. "Taj, Oberoi and Cafe Leopold under attack", CNN says. Also mentions CST (Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus), the Central Railway Terminus and Metro Cinema. Shots of people running for cover outside the circle at Metro Cinema. It appears that the terrorists captured a police van and came tearing down the road. People around looked up to them for help, but the van opened gunfire. Go to sleep, I tell myself. Tomorrow is a hectic day, lunch with the dean of the University, followed by a seminar with 50 students who have had the misfortune of having to study my book *God's Little Soldier*, followed by my last lecture at the Poetikdozentur. Cama hospital joins the Taj, Oberoi, CST amongst the places attacked. Must be some mistake. Why would terrorists go to a children's and women's hospital? 11 p.m. I'm still watching. No question about it, the idiot box was named after me. CNN is concentrating full time on the Taj and Oberoi and Shabad Lubavitch Center but hardly touches upon the other seven or eight sights where only Indians hung out. How come whenever we've had terrorist attacks on Bombay, it's always simultaneously at multiple locations.

Isn't it bizarre that most of the questions that the students at the workshop have had for me are about extremism and terrorism? And now I'm witness to one of the worst terrorist attacks on my city from 4,000 miles away. At 12.30 a.m. the radio station here wakes me up and wants me to comment on what is happening in Bombay. All I know is that fiction can never keep pace with reality. I suspect Updike, Rushdie, Christoph Peters and yours truly who have written about terrorism really know nothing about the subject when confronted by the insane killings in reality.

Late night, and I'm still watching TV. Taj, Oberoi and a Jewish Center, exclusively engage the interest of the CNN team covering the tourist attacks in Bombay with just a passing reference to Nariman House, CST Railway Station and Cama Hospital. I switch to German channels. Surely, I tell myself, German media are more balanced and sensible and will focus as much on the hotels with foreign guests, read American, British and Israeli visitors, as on locations with a concentration of Indians. I have no German, but understand enough to gather that these media guys, too, do not think that the most cynical attack on Cama Hospital deserves some TV time. As a matter of fact, they don't even mention that it is a children's and women's hospital. I loathe stereotypes, and yet it would seem that only the whites matter.

There is a fire at Oberoi and now flames the size of gigantic sunflares are shooting up to the sky out of the Taj and great big grey-black clouds of smoke are billowing out from next to the landmark dome of the hotel. How are the guests at the five-star hotels coping with this calamity? There are continuous explosions, shootouts, hand grenades blowing up and now the fire. The guests daren't get out for fear of running into the terrorists, and yet if they don't, the fire and the smoke will kill them. Are the hotel authorities or the police looking into how to get them out safely? A wounded guest is brought out by the Taj staff on one of its tall luggage trolleys; he's followed by a man who hangs like a hammock, his hands and legs held up by four men carrying him to an ambulance.

CNN keeps switching to its sister channel in India called CNN-IBN and is desperately trying to get impressions from eye-witnesses. Once in a while they have an expert on terrorism from their own bank of reporters. I'm incensed to find one of the experts say that the U.S. and British governments are considering how to reduce the risk of war between the two nuclear powers, India and Pakistan, both of whom are gearing up for a showdown after this attack. There's a crucial difference between Indian and foreign anchors and reporters. The ones from the subcontinent have only one pitch for their voices: a new octave of shrillness that slips into hysteria, with or without cause. The foreigners are much more insidious. They sound reasonable and speak with authority thus camouflaging their highly dangerous prejudices and biases. Is it not premature talking about a war between India and Pakistan while the situation is so fluid and since it will take time to find out who is behind the terror this time?

The chief minister of Maharashtra seems to be flying back from Kerala. He's as always a fount of platitudes and vacuous reassurances. He has asked the PM to send out the military and is asking the denizens of Bombay to stay at home and call up the police if they see anything suspicious. The situation, he says, will soon be brought under control. It has to come under control by morning, I tell myself. It will be 11.30 or twelve noon by that time in Bombay. Surely, daylight will smoke the terrorists out.

My mind keeps going back to the guests in the Taj and the Oberoi. The fire's raging even more torridly in the Taj. Is the fire brigade working with the police and the military on how to get out

the hotel guests? We need to set up a cell where all the services will coordinate and consult with each other to rescue the visitors not just from the terrorists, but also from the collateral damage.

What's going on? Why doesn't CNN tell us what happened at the Central Railway Station? There must have been thousands and thousands of men and women waiting to catch the trains back home. What happened there? How many were shot dead? And what about the Cama Hospital? Were children and women shot? They keep showing shots of Karkare, the head of the anti-terrorist division, wearing a bullet-proof vest and then they immediately tell us that he has been shot dead along with two of his colleagues. Shot dead where and how? And what about this Jewish Center? Does that mean that the Jewish community in our city is being revived?

Thursday morning, 27th November: Not even 7.00 and I'm out of bed. I'm like a news junkie, the TV is already on. This can't be. The Taj, the Oberoi and the Jewish Center are still under siege and burning, the hostages are still inside, the terrorists are still running rampant. The number of the dead keeps rising. The military is out on the streets. The camera's spending most of its time on the Taj. Must be a heavy-duty telephoto lens. No reporters and no pedestrians allowed anywhere in the immediate vicinity of the Taj.

The Prime Minister is on the screen. He has one of those soft, dead voices. No fault of his. But he comes across emotionless and limp. I must not formulate these silly judgements based on the quality of the voice. In the documentaries that I've seen, Mahatma Gandhi had a squeaky, colourless voice, but he could carry the entire nation on his shoulders. Come on, Manmohan Singh, lead us out of the darkness into the light. Get us out of this terrible hole that the terrorists have dug for us. Kick the bloody terrorists out of my city and out of our country. Oh God, what is he saying. Oh no, no, no. Manmohan Singh is doing exactly what Indian Prime Ministers and other leaders have done over the last 40 years. He's already pointing his finger at our neighbours. Haven't we learned a damn thing? Can't we keep our mouths shut till the facts and nothing but the absolutely proven facts are out for all the world to see, instead of making knee-jerk accusations. "We will take up strongly with our neighbours that the use of their territory for launching attacks on us will not be tolerated and that there would be a cost, if suitable measures are not taken by them." Oh, Manmohan Singh, and I thought you had better judgement. There is supposed to be detente going on between Pakistan and us. If Pakistan is involved in this, God help us. But also if they are involved, we need 100 % proof before blabbering.

The commandos are in Bombay. They are in black and the guy who is their spokesman has a black scarf around his face. He's talking about the corridors of the hotels being full of dead bodies and blood and of the slow progress in eliminating the terrorists. Many of the hotel guests are streaming out or are being carried out. Each one has a tale of horror to tell. Perhaps they need urgent psychological help.

The usual suspects seem to be in place in Bombay. A total lack of timely intelligence. And even when there is intelligence, warning of attacks on the city of Bombay, the wonderful government

ministers and the police pay no heed. We are now told that the attackers came in from the sea and docked their dinghies at Sassoon Docks. Must have been in the dead of the night. I suddenly get the feeling I must be watching *Die Harder*, part two. A terrorist in black is on the screen. He's caught mid-action with a machine gun in hand. He is high on adrenalin and racing past on his mission of death. Any moment now Jeremy Irons will speak in his clipped tones and order the second instalment of murder and mayhem. Where are you, Bruce Willis. Parachute down and terminate the whole lot of them.

But the fact of the matter is, this time the terrorists really are high-tech guys. You can see that they have done their homework, they have been trained by the best killers in the world and they have planned every move. It appears that either they or their accomplices had already rented rooms in the hotels and stock-piled their weapons there. Are there only ten of them or are there many more? Did they go to the Central Railway Terminus, then to Cama Hospital and then spread out to the Taj and Oberoi and the Jewish Center? It seems more than likely that they had substantial help in the city.

The telephone keeps ringing constantly. I'm now an expert on the terror attacks in Bombay. I must either be a clairvoyant and have an astral connection with the terrorists or I'm their leader currently stationed in Tübingen and they are consulting me every moment on the course of action. I feel like a fraud. The radio stations here and television channels must be really short of totally ignorant Indians in the vicinity and so are consulting the one man who knows it all. Give me a break.

TV interview with the student television station of the University of Tübingen. Dorothee Kimmich, our hostess, is interviewing Christoph Peters and me. She speaks to the point, asks relevant questions about the wellsprings of terrorism with the occasional reference to the current situation. And then I'm whisked off to a radio station which is linked on broadband to a major German TV channel. The camera focuses on me. I can see my image on the TV right in front of me. I look haggard and utterly at a loss as to what I'm doing here. But I'm the Oracle of Delphi and I'm about to tell Germany in my prescient voice what's going to happen next in Bombay. I can see the woman at the other end who is going to ask me questions getting her face fixed up. Okay, we are about to go live. "What do you think about what is happening in Bombay today?" I can see trouble brewing. Am I jumping for joy that my city is in the throes of one of the worst terrorist crises the city has seen? Who is going to rescue the hostages, mostly foreigners, in the hotels and the Jewish Center? And for God's sake can anyone tell me what is happening to the Indians who were killed or wounded at the Central Railway Terminals or the Cama Hospital? Or is it that there are no Indians living in India and the only people who matter are the foreigners? But I'm sensible and answer the question as honestly as I can. The next query, however, completely throws me. The interpreter who is translating the questions the lady is putting to me asks, "Bombay, the international polls of mega-cities reveal, is a soul-less and unfeeling place. How do you think the city is reacting...?" I'm so taken aback by the first part of his question that I respond instantly: "Are you kidding? Bombay soul-less and unfeeling? Frenetic, yes. Mad

energy, yes. We make perhaps the worst drivers in the world, yes. But soul-less and unfeeling?" The interpreter comes back at me and savages me: "This is a very serious programme, and we don't expect the use of words like 'Are you kidding' from you." I'm truly aghast. My city is under siege, the number of the wounded and dying is rising every few minutes, God knows what's happening to the hostages and to the Indians who do not seem to exist for foreign media. Even if by any chance Bombay was the most soul-less and unfeeling place on earth, this is hardly the moment to refer to it in those words. Perhaps I shouldn't have been so sharp, but I simply can't believe that these people are so heartless that in such a dire crisis they have the gall to speak so disparagingly about Bombay. One of the best things about Bombay is that even though it might be fearful, it just goes back to being normal the very next day. Bombayites are not brave, they are not super-courageous, they just don't give in to terrorists. They go back to their normal lives.

Evening: My final talk. I feel a terrible sense of disconnect with my city. There has been a barrage of emails from friends from all over the world asking how I was, and if any of my close relations and friends had suffered. I cannot quite make sense of that question. However false it may sound, isn't everybody in Bombay my friend and relative at least in this time of crisis? I'm so damn critical of my country and countrymen (though nothing compared to how critical I'm of myself), but I feel such a closeness to the people of Bombay at this moment.

Dinner. This can't be possible. This has been my mantra for the last 48 hours: How can those poor hostages survive through this? The commando spokesman talks again. They are closing in, but there is no end in sight. Doesn't the government realize the urgent necessity to educate the populace of India, especially Bombay, and the rest of the world that part of the reason things are progressing so slowly is that the terrorists have hostages? I have little doubt that the terrorists could have been blown to bits many hours ago, if we didn't care about what happened to the hostages. The Jewish Center crisis has come to an end. I had no idea that the rabbi and his wife had come to India two years ago from abroad. They are no more and so are many of the hostages. But as far as the foreign media are concerned, it would seem death is no longer the great equalizer. As Orwell would have put it: The foreign dead are more equal than the Indian dead.

Friday, 28th November. 60 hours. There was news that finally all the hostages were freed not just from the Oberoi, but also from the Taj and that the crisis was over. But it was not. It went on for another few hours, because the terrorists were still there and their stock piles of ammunition were going off as if every single country in the world was celebrating its independence on the same day and at the same hour. But it does look as if it is over now. And I'm beginning to wonder whether the worst has yet to come. The blame game is being ratcheted up in India. The different political parties in the country are blaming each other. I doubt whether they really give a damn about what happened and the people who died and the hostages who were so brutally killed. Their only focus is the elections next year and how they can turn these events to their own advantage.

Indian media in general – though there must be some exceptions – has become apoplectic and they are baying for blood. No prizes for guessing whose blood. I'm of course naive beyond words. We didn't ask for urgent and instant help from America, Israel, the UK and any other nations who had far greater experience and expertise in handling such hostage crises because of some mistaken notion of pride. But can we now, at least temporarily, chop off the hand that points the finger at our neighbours and instead call on the FBI, Scotland Yard, Israeli intelligence and Interpol along with a member from Pakistan and of course Indian representatives, to get to the bottom of some major questions: Who were the culprits? Who was financing them? Which country had given them shelter? We need to learn everything that we can about them. Having done that and having come to a conclusion agreed upon by the representatives of the major democracies of the world, we can then unitedly point our finger at whoever is responsible. Whether it be Pakistan, the Taliban, the Al-Qaida, or anybody else, India will then be in a position to take a very strong stance. But here again all talk of war would be utterly counterproductive. If, by any chance, it is Pakistan who is the guilty party, then it will be our duty to make the nations of the world realize the gravity of our grievance and to bring home the fact that India was the victim today, but they themselves will be victims tomorrow or the day after. Hence the guilty party has to be brought to justice immediately. The most draconian sanctions must be enforced against the culprit until they sign a pact that they will never again support any terrorists in their country or finance them. If they are not willing to do this, and God forbid that the Pakistani government or military will be so foolish as to not accept these terms, then India would have a moral right to consider retaliatory measures.

As to the foreign media, and wonderful anchors like Wolf Blitzer, for whom the world begins and ends with the West, just a word of caution: Empires collapse, super powers become underdogs, hubris takes a terrible fall. Wake up, guys, one of these days China or some other nation is going to be at the top. So maybe it's a good idea to listen to what Jesus Christ said: "Treat thy neighbours as you'd like to be treated". For if you don't, you're going to find out that they're going to treat you exactly as you have been treating them. Then don't be surprised if one day you find you don't exist for them.