

Attack on the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel: A Proxy War on America?

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The cover photo shows smoke billowing out of the heritage Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, which was the prime target of the terror attacks of November 26, 2008, in Mumbai, India's largest city and its financial capital. This hotel was patronized largely by Western tourists, as were some of the other attack sites such as the Nariman House and the Leopold Café, so the death toll of Americans and Europeans was unusually high. Indian commandos were able to flush out the terrorists, after a siege that lasted more than 60 hours and claimed 308 victims, who sustained bullet wounds, penetrating shrapnel, blast injuries, and burns.



One of the local public hospitals itself was attacked and staff had to ensure the safety of patients while fending for themselves. I was the physician in a disaster preparedness team in the buffer zone; however, the surge capacity of the local hospitals was able to contain the entire event. These attacks have brought the overburdened public health infrastructure of India under scrutiny. Despite the push for its top-end hospitals to practice “medical tourism,” India has realized that it is eventually the modest public hospital that responds to all disasters—natural or man-made.

Fortunately, due to sensible risk communication during this terrorist attack, the “second” disaster was averted. Such events have often triggered a wave of riots and killings, which were often worse than the primary event. Destruction of symbolic structures in large cities has been a strategy of terrorists worldwide for spreading hopelessness, fear, and panic. Adopting the “all-hazards” approach to disasters is the way forward for India in dealing with these events.