

ASIA PACIFIC

Bangladeshi Troops Move to End Hostage Standoff

By JULFIKAR ALI MANIK, GEETA ANAND and RUSSELL GOLDMAN JULY 1, 2016

DHAKA, Bangladesh — Bangladeshi Army troops moved in on Saturday to end an 11-hour standoff at a restaurant in Dhaka, the capital, after gunmen stormed into the building, detonated explosives and took at least 20 people hostage on Friday night.

Gunfire and explosions could be heard as the soldiers, backed by armored vehicles, swept in to the restaurant in the city's diplomatic district at 7:40 a.m. on Saturday. At least a dozen people were rescued, including several foreigners, the police said.

Two police officers were killed in the initial standoff with the attackers, and 30 people were wounded, mostly from shrapnel, officials said. A police inspector said that at least five militants had been killed in the rescue operation.

Details about other fatalities or injuries from the attack or the rescue operation were not immediately available.

The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack on Friday.

“Islamic State commandos attack a restaurant frequented by foreigners in the city of Dhaka in Bangladesh,” reported Amaq, an information outlet linked to the Islamic State.

Outside the restaurant, more than 200 people waited all night beyond the police cordon in the diplomatic enclave, dozens of them relatives and friends of the hostages. Some of them communicated by text message and social media with the hostages inside.

Several kitchen employees who had locked themselves in a bathroom inside the restaurant, the Holey Artisan Bakery, posted a picture of themselves on Facebook, bare chested against the stifling heat.

Soumir Roy, 28, one of the employees, messaged his brother, saying, “We are here so if possible break the wall of the bathroom and rescue us.”

But after the gunfire and blasts from the rescue operations ceased, the messages from Mr. Roy stopped, and his brother and sister sat on the roadside weeping as they awaited news of whether he had survived. Ambulances could be seen leaving the scene.

Eight to 10 armed men entered the restaurant, where about 20 foreigners were dining, around 8:45 p.m., according to Sumon Reza, a kitchen worker who escaped and spoke to reporters. The attackers shouted “God is great” before opening fire and detonating several explosives, Mr. Reza said. He said the attackers were armed with pistols, swords and bombs.

Amaq later reported, “More than 20 individuals of varying nationalities killed after a commando attack on the Artisan restaurant.” There was no way to confirm that claim.

Early on Saturday, the group posted photographs of what it said were the bodies of foreigners killed in the attack and claimed that it was holding hostages, Amaq said.

The attack was the latest in a series of killings by Islamist extremists that have rocked Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority country, in recent months. The Islamic State

is known to have claimed responsibility for 18 other attacks in the last year, most perpetrated against religious minorities, including Hindus, Buddhists and Christians.

The increase in violence has raised fears that the once-moderate country is in the grip of a wave of fanaticism that the government refuses to acknowledge. Despite months of attacks and subsequent claims of responsibility by the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, the government — which recently concluded a crackdown on extremists in which 10,000 people were arrested — maintains that neither terrorist group has a presence in the country.

“The continuous denial of the presence of local militant group connections with international terror groups has not been helpful,” said Ali Riaz, a professor of political science at Illinois State University and an expert on South Asian politics. “What we’re witnessing can’t be small groups coming together. It is clearly a very coordinated attack. If this doesn’t convince them to come out of denial, then I don’t know what will.”

As gunfire and explosions rang out across the upscale Gulshan neighborhood on Friday, witnesses posted images on Twitter of paramilitary officers surrounding the Holey Artisan Bakery, which is popular with expatriates, diplomats and middle-class families.



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Several foreigners worked at the restaurant, including an Italian who escaped and an Argentine, whose whereabouts is unknown, the local news media reported.

Mr. Reza, the kitchen worker, said he and another employee were able to escape by jumping from the building's second floor.

"They blasted several crude bombs, causing wide-scale panic among everyone," Mr. Reza told a Bangladeshi newspaper, *The Daily Star*. "I managed to flee during this confusion."

The total number of hostages, including restaurant employees, was not known. Neither were the identities of the attackers.

"We are requesting the ones who are inside the restaurant to talk to us, relay us your demands," Benazir Ahmed, director general of the Rapid Action Battalion, the country's counterterrorism force, said Friday, according to *The Dhaka Tribune*.

During the standoff, police erected a cordon around the restaurant, where family members of those inside gathered to await information. Fazley Rahim Khan, a businessman, waited on the edge of the police line, barely able to see the restaurant. He said he believed that his son Tahmid Hasib Khan, 22, was being held hostage.

Mr. Khan said his son, a student in Canada, had just returned home on Friday for Ramadan. The family celebrated the iftar, the evening meal breaking the Ramadan fast, and then the son headed to the restaurant.

"I'm just praying to get back my son," he said.

At least two Sri Lankans were among the hostages, Hari Kesha Wijesekara, a former president of the Sri Lanka-Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce, and his wife, Shyama, according to the group's current president, T.D. Packir.

An Indian doctor, Sat Prakash, 43, who worked at a nearby clinic had been held hostage but escaped minutes before the army stormed the restaurant, said his friend Jahirul Islam Milton.

Four diplomatic cars were parked outside the area all night. Foreign diplomats waiting to hear word of people inside refused to speak to reporters.

The State Department advised Americans in the area to “shelter in place and monitor news.”

“The situation’s ongoing, obviously — too early for us to say who’s involved, motivation, any of that stuff,” said John Kirby, the State Department spokesman.

Mr. Kirby said all Americans working for the United States Mission in Dhaka were safe, but officials were still trying to locate Bangladeshi employees.

Julfikar Ali Manik reported from Dhaka, Geeta Anand from New Delhi, and Russell Goldman from New York. Rukmini Callimachi contributed reporting from Paris.

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