

Mali: 3 confirmed dead in attack on hotel in capital, says Army

20/11/2015 19:47 by admin

Bamako (Mali): At least three people were killed after men shouting "God is great" and armed with guns and grenades stormed the Radisson Blu hotel in Mali's capital Friday morning and trapped guests inside, military officials said.

The Brussels-based Rezidor Hotel group that operates the hotel said the assailants had "locked in" 140 guests and 30 employees, though Malian army commander Modibo Nama Traore later said that 20 people had been released.

Any number of Muslim extremist groups could be behind the attack, which unfolded one week after the attacks on Paris that killed 129 people. A handful of jihadi groups seized the northern half of Mali in 2012 but were ousted from cities and towns by a French military intervention.

Traore said 10 gunmen stormed the hotel shouting "Allahu Akbar," or "God is great," in Arabic before firing on the guards. A staffer at the hotel who gave his name as Tamba Diarra said over the phone that the attackers used grenades in the assault.

The U.S. Embassy in Mali asked citizens to shelter in place amid reports of an "ongoing active shooter operation" at the hotel in Bamako. People in the area ran for their lives along a dirt road as a soldier in full combat gear escorted them to safety.

Some guests were able to escape the hotel. Monique Kouame Affoue Ekonde, an Ivorian, said she and six other people, including a Turkish woman, were escorted out by security forces as the gunmen rushed "toward the fifth or sixth floor."

"I think they are still there. I've left the hotel and I don't know where to go. I'm tired and in a state of shock," she said.

A top official at the French presidency said French citizens were in the hotel but could not give more details because their number and identities were not confirmed. The official spoke anonymously in line with presidency policy.

Citing Chinese diplomats in Mali, Chinese state broadcaster CCTV reported that about 10 Chinese citizens were sheltering inside their hotel rooms. The embassy was in phone contact with them and all were reported safe, according to the report. All are employees of Chinese companies working in Mali.

Five Turkish Airlines personnel are among the freed hostages, Turkey's state-run news agency said.

The website of the official China Daily newspaper also cited an unidentified witness as saying one Chinese citizen had been rescued.

The U.N. mission said it was sending security reinforcements and medical aid to the scene. Ambulances were seen rushing to the hotel as a military helicopter flew overhead.

Following a military coup in 2012, Islamic extremists took control of northern Mali, prompting a French-led military intervention in early 2013 that forced the extremists from northern towns and cities, though the north remains insecure and militant attacks have extended farther south this year.

In March masked gunmen shot up a restaurant in Bamako, located in Mali's south, that is popular with foreigners, killing five people.

About 1,000 French troops remain in the country. The Netherlands also has troops working with the UN mission in Mali. According to the Dutch defense ministry, some 450 Dutch military personnel are taking part in the mission along with four Apache and three Chinook helicopters. Most of the Dutch force is based in Gao, but there are a few officers at the U.N. mission headquarters in Bamako.

- AP