**Day of cricket that turned into 30 minutes of terror**

Dozen gunmen escape after assault on convoy carrying Sri Lankan team to stadium

In the early morning sunshine over Pakistan's cultural capital, Lahore, the Sri Lankan cricket team's coach glided out of one of the city's most luxurious hotels, the Pearl Continental, and edged into the morning traffic. The squad were to take to the field of Lahore's Gaddafi stadium, one of the subcontinent's cauldrons of cricket, in the third day of their Test match against [Pakistan](http://www.theguardian.com/world/pakistan).

Winding through, the coach stopped at the junction of Liberty roundabout, a landmark noted for its sculptured pond. Mohammad Khalil, driver of the bus carrying the Sri Lankan team, remembered thinking how quiet the roads were.

But at 8.30am the city's roar was replaced by a deadlier boom: that of a rocket launcher.

"As we approached the Liberty Roundabout, I slowed down. Just then what seemed to be a rocket was fired at my coach, but it missed and I think flew over the top of the vehicle," said Khalil. "Almost immediately afterwards a person ran in front of the bus and threw a grenade in our direction. But it rolled underneath the coach and did not seem to cause that much damage ... I was shocked and stunned."

What had begun as a day of cricket turned into half an hour of terror. The first explosion had in fact missed the cricket convoy by 20ft. From the shade of the trees that line the main boulevard in eastern Lahore a dozen men came armed with rockets and guns in their hands.

Raking bullets into the side of the coach carrying the Sri Lankan cricket team, a dozen young men were intent on causing bloody mayhem in the upmarket avenues of the city. The first three gunmen on the scene, captured by television cameras, calmly opened fire with AK-47s on the coach - mowing down Pakistani police.

They then turned their attention to the bus, coolly aiming first at the tyres, then the chassis before shattering the windows. The coach quickly filled with shards of glass and pools of blood.

Injured players hit the floor and there were cries of "Go! Go!" as the coach zigzagged its way through the ambush. "We all dived to the floor to take cover," said Sri Lanka's team captain, Mahela Jayawardene.

What saved the lives of the test cricketers and umpires was the lightning reflexes of Khalil, who kept his foot on the accelerator as bullets ripped into the vehicle and explosions filled the air.

"[The rocket] missed us and hit an electric pole, after which all hell broke loose," he said. "All of us were taken aback ... I did not stop and kept moving."

The driver of a bus following behind, carrying the Australian umpires, was killed. The attack was an audacious, commando-style guerrilla operation. The gunmen wearing backpacks, believed to be full of grenades, split into pairs and moved swiftly to take positions at the roundabout.

The rocket that narrowly missed the oncoming Sri Lankan bus had slammed into a parade of shops - reducing one shopfront to cinders. Malls around the roundabout were punctured by high-calibre bullets that apparently missed their targets.

Muhammad Hashim, a security guard at the Big City shopping centre, told the Guardian he and seven other colleagues ran for cover behind the building at the sound of gunshots. It may well have saved his life. Just a few feet from where he was sat back at his post was a large bullethole on the shopping centre's steps.

The militants continued shooting for another 30 minutes - with little resistance from local police. Seven people, including six police, were killed.

The wounded included seven players, an umpire and an assistant coach. The Sri Lankan team saw its new star batsman, Tharanga Paranavitana, rushed to hospital to have a bullet removed from his chest. The bowler Ajantha Mendis had surgeons pick shrapnel from his torso and vice-captain, Kumar Sangakkara, saw his thigh riddled with shards of metal and glass.

Sangakkara was stoic in the face of the terror. "I don't regret coming to play cricket. That is what we have done all our lives. That is our profession ... I regret what has happened and the situation that we have gone through. All we want is to go back home to our families and get back home and be safe. That is all I can think now," he said.

There were tales of individual heroism. Chris Broad, an English match referee who was supposed to be officiating the Test, dived on top of another umpire to save his life. Broad, father of England fast-bowler Stuart, was one of several officials and umpires travelling in a minibus directly behind the Sri Lankan vehicle.

He leapt upon Ehsan Raza, a local umpire, in an effort to save him from the hail of gunfire. Raza, who was shot in the back, was said to be in a critical condition in hospital. Dominic Cork, the former England cricketer who was in Lahore to commentate on the match, said Broad had told him he had suffered "the most frightening experience of his life".

Inside the vehicle, fear mingled with uncertainty. Sri Lanka's assistant coach, Paul Farbrace, who is British, told the BBC: "People have talked about grenades, rocket launchers and all sorts, but I have to say I wasn't aware of too much because I was lying on the floor of the coach and just hoping to God I wasn't going to be struck."

It could have been much worse. Because the onslaught began before the shops opened, shopping crowds were thin.

Police arrested four men in connection with the assault but the dozen militants simply dropped their weapons and appeared to melt away into the crowds. TV footage of the attack showed gunmen with backpacks firing as they retreated from the scene.

It took police an hour to arrive on the scene and much of the evidence appeared to have been carted away by locals. An abandoned car was found with a stash containing three Kalasknikovs, 12 grenades, a pistol and remote-control bombs was found in a nearby park in Lahore.

The Guardian saw a young boy gleefully pull a cartridge out of the pond in the centre of the roundabout and flash it to TV cameras. On the streets lay bullet casings apparently missed by local law enforcement.

Several damaged vehicles were left behind as well as a lone, unexploded grenade. The bodies of three people lay crumpled on the ground. Associated Press reported police handling what looked like two suicide jackets. Officers also recovered two backpacks, as well as walkie-talkies.

Last night Lahore's police were searching buildings and stopping cars in a massive security sweep, but admitted they had lost track of the gunmen.

Like the tragedy in India's financial capital, Mumbai, yesterday's terror strike was planned to cause maximum mayhem and grab headlines. Not since the Munich Olympics in 1972 have athletes and sports-people been specifically targeted.

In both Mumbai - where the body count topped 170 over three days - and Lahore, the gunmen launched a coordinated strike using multiple assailants who were armed with explosives and assault rifles with little fear of death or capture.

"I want to say it's the same pattern, the same terrorists who attacked Mumbai," Salman Taseer, the governor of central Punjab province, told reporters at the site of the attack. "They are trained criminals. They were not common people. The kind of weaponry they had, the kind of arms they had, the way they attacked ... they were not common citizens, they were obviously trained."

There does not appear to be any immediate connection with Sri Lanka's war with the separatist Tamil Tigers in the island's north-east.

Others speculated that Pakistan's homegrown Taliban, who consider sport unIslamic, were behind the attack.

Wasim Akram, one of Pakistan's best-known fast bowlers, said the future for this cricket-mad nation was all but over. "How do you expect a foreign team to come to Pakistan now?" he said.

Whatever the truth is, the attacks have dealt another blow to a city that has seen foreign tourism disappear, and a country that appears to be teetering on the brink.