

Sherpa brawl hits peak

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When climbers tackle the world's tallest mountain, they expect to battle freezing temperatures, icy winds, a lack of oxygen and altitude sickness.

But a trio of foreigners faced additional adversity that nearly turned deadly as they were closing in on the summit of Mt Everest.

At 7010m, Swiss climber Ueli Steck, 36, Italian Simone Moro, 45, and Briton Jonathan Griffith, 29, became involved in an almighty brawl.

Accused of knocking ice on to a Sherpa and injuring him, and breaking mountain etiquette by stepping over a guide's rope, they were allegedly attacked by 100 Sherpas.

A statement posted on Mr Moro's website gives a detailed account of the drama that unfolded.

"They became instantly aggressive, not only punched and kicked the climbers, but threw many rocks as well," the statement reads.

"The lead Sherpa began shouting and banging the ice with his axe erratically."

Mr Steck told the BBC that one even used a pocket knife.

"We all suffered cuts and bruises, and Ueli took a stone to his face," Mr Griffith said.

"It was very scary. As climbers, we all get into very dangerous situations, but this was the first time I really thought this was the end."

Things calmed down after 50 minutes, but the climbers were warned that "if they weren't gone in one hour, they would all be killed".

"We were told one of us would die that night and the rest would follow later," Mr Griffith told the Daily Mail.

The group, known to provide support to foreign trekkers, initially ignored advice by other Western climbers to "just run", believing they could discuss the situation and sort it out.

"We couldn't lash back because the mob would have gone for us then," Mr Griffith said.

Helping to end the fight was professional guide and women's world record holder for the most ascents of the summit of Mt Everest, Melissa Arnot.

The American has worked on the mountain for the past six years and credited a good relationship with the Sherpas and passive conversation in preventing the violence from escalating.

"I felt like it was much less likely that they would hit me, being a woman," she told ABC News in the US.

Ms Arnot said she positioned herself between the trio and the guides, "holding the hands of another Sherpa", hoping to ease the tension.

"The Sherpas were upset with the foreign climbers for trying to continue to climb while they were working to fix safety ropes.

"I wasn't trying to be heroic, I do think my presence prevented some violence," she said.

Mr Griffith acknowledged the bravery of Ms Arnot and said she single-handedly allowed them to escape, standing guard over a tent while the three climbers managed to get away.

"Melissa saved our lives," he said.

The men packed the bare essentials and retreated down the mountain on an "unbelievably treacherous route" across a glacier, going as fast as possible to escape, without even using ropes for safety.

In two-and-a-half hours they covered the distance they normally would in a full day.

Ms Arnot acknowledged errors on both sides.

"I think the foreign climbers made the mistakes and the Sherpas made some mistakes in communications, but at the end of the day, violence is completely unacceptable in any scenario, especially when you are very high on a mountain," she said.

Mr Moro has a different take on events.

He believes the fight erupted because the lead Sherpa could have been dealing with bruised pride after the three passed him on the mountain.

"Whatever the reason may be, there is no reason to instigate (the) vigilante rule and to try and kill three visiting climbers," Mr Moro said.

With thousands of dollars spent by each mountaineer trying to complete the ultimate human challenge, Nepalese government officials were quick to play down the seriousness of the incident, fearing they would lose vital income.

A spokesman for Nepal's Ministry of Tourism, Dipendra Paudel, said there has been a "slight misunderstanding", which had been sorted out, and pledged to ensure the safety of climbers.

The Nepalese authorities, the Ministry of Tourism and the head of the Sherpa Association are now investigating the attack.

At this stage, the confrontation is being blamed on a "clash of cultures" and "ill feelings" towards foreigners, who flock to the world's highest peak in increasing numbers.

About 4000 climbers have stood on top of Mt Everest since it was first scaled by New Zealander Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay in 1953.