AURORA, Colorado (AP)—As the new Batman movie played on the screen, a gunman dressed in black and wearing a helmet, body armor and a gas mask stepped through a side door. At first he was just a silhouette, taken by some in the audience for a stunt that was part of one of the summer's most highly anticipated films.

But then, authorities said, he threw gas canisters that filled the packed suburban Denver theater with smoke, and, in the confusing haze between Hollywood fantasy and terrifying reality, opened fire as people screamed and dove for cover.

At least 12 people were killed and 59 wounded in one of the deadliest mass shootings in recent U.S. history.

"He looked like an assassin ready to go to war,'' said Jordan Crofter, a moviegoer who was unhurt in the attack early Friday, about a half-hour after the special midnight opening of "The Dark Knight Rises.''

24-year-old gunman

The gunman, identified by police as 24-year-old James Holmes, used a military-style semi-automatic rifle, a shotgun and a pistol, stopping only to reload.

The suspect marched up the aisle in the stadium-style theater, picking off those who tried to flee, witnesses said. Authorities said he hit 71 people. One of them was struck in an adjacent theater by gunfire that went through the wall.

"He would reload and shoot and anyone who would try to leave would just get killed,'' said Jennifer Seeger, adding that bullet casings landed on her head and burned her forehead.

Within minutes, frantic emergency services calls brought some 200 police officers, ambulances and emergency crews to the theater. Holmes was captured in the parking lot. Police said they later found that his nearby apartment was booby-trapped.

Authorities gave no motive for the attack. The FBI said there was no indication of ties to any terrorist groups.

Deadliest since Columbine

It was the deadliest in Colorado since the Columbine High School massacre in suburban Denver in 1999, when two students killed 12 classmates and a teacher and wounded 26 others before killing themselves.

The new Batman movie, the last in the trilogy starring Christian Bale, opened worldwide Friday with midnight showings in the U.S.

The plot has the villain Bane facing Bale's Caped Crusader with a nuclear weapon that could destroy all of fictional Gotham.

It was the worst mass shooting in the U.S. since the Nov. 5, 2009, attack at Fort Hood, Texas. An Army psychiatrist was charged with killing 13 soldiers and civilians and wounding more than two dozen others.