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India Police Say They Hold 9 From Hindu Terrorist Cell

By HARI KUMAR Published: November 11, 2008

NEW DELHI — For the first time in this Hindu-majority nation of 1.1 billion people, the police have announced the arrest of people who are accused of being part of a Hindu terrorist cell.

Enlarge This Image



Brijesh Singh/Reuters

Members of a right-wing Hindu group, Bajrang Dal, offering prayers last month in Agra, India.

Police officials in western Maharashtra State said they had arrested the nine suspects and charged them with murder and conspiracy in connection with the bombing in September of a Muslim-majority area in Malegaon, a small city. Six people, all Muslims, died in the explosion, which was among a string of terrorist attacks in Indian cities in recent months.

Blame for several of these attacks has been placed on radical Islamist groups; one group, calling itself Indian Mujahedeen, claimed responsibility for several attacks. But the arrests of the Hindu suspects in the Malegaon bombing raised the possibility of another source of terrorism, involving a radical Hindu fringe.

"This is a very dangerous trend," said Ajit Doval, former chief of India's Intelligence Bureau, who added that it could undercut efforts to bolster pluralism in India.

Those arrested by the police antiterrorism squad in Maharashtra over the past two weeks included a Hindu nun with links to the principal opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, and an army colonel, who is suspected of having provided ammunition and training to the bombers.

The Indian Army has long viewed itself as being free of ideological or political bias, so the arrest of an army officer was deeply troubling to the military. "I can tell you that we are taking it seriously," said the defense minister,

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Pragya Singh Thakur, shown in 2007, has been arrested in a September bombing.

A. K. Antony.

The arrests reinforced growing suspicions over the last few years of a potential threat from Hindu extremists. In August, two members of a right-wing Hindu group called the Bajrang Dal were killed while assembling bombs in the northern industrial city of

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Kanpur. In 2006, two people who were thought to belong to the same group died under similar circumstances in a bomb-making workshop in Nanded.

Officials in the Central Bureau of Investigation told reporters in New Delhi on Saturday that investigators had established a link between the Nanded group and the Malegaon bombing.

Bal Thackeray, the leader of another Hindu hard-line group, the Shiv Sena, wrote in June in the group's weekly magazine that Hindus should defend themselves from Islamist attacks by forming their own squads of suicide bombers.

"The threat of Islamic terror in India is rising," Mr. Thackeray wrote, according to a translation from the Marathi language that was published in *The Hindu*, a national English-language daily. "It is time to counter the same with Hindu terror. Hindu suicide squads should be readied to ensure the existence of Hindu society and to protect the nation."

Prosecutors said that investigators of the Malegaon bombing on Sept. 29 traced a motorcycle at the site of the explosion, apparently used to plant the bomb, to a Hindu nun named Pragya Singh Thakur, 37, who lives nearby in Gujarat State. While in college, Ms. Thakur was a member of the student wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party, according to Vishnu Dutt Sharma, a senior leader of the student wing.

Mr. Sharma described Ms. Thakur as "aggressive in her speeches and work." She was religious and studious, Mr. Sharma said, and did postgraduate work in history.

During a pilgrimage in 2007, Ms. Thakur renounced a worldly life and became a nun, or a sadhvi in Hindi, cutting her hair short and donning orange robes, the sacred color of Hinduism, according to a brother-in-law, Bhagwan Jha. After she became a nun, her name was changed to Purnachetnanand Giri, which means complete consciousness.

Ms. Thakur's lawyer, Naveen Chomal, said she had done nothing wrong and that the police had arrested her only because her motorcycle was found at the site of the bombing. The police have said they also have taped telephone conversations in which Ms. Thakur wondered aloud why the Malegaon bombing had not inflicted a higher death toll.

Some people have begun to treat the suspects as heroic figures. Several Hindu organizations have rallied to Ms. Thakur's side, contributing to a fund for her legal defense.

Her father, Chandrapal Singh Thakur, told *The Times of India*, a national daily newspaper: "If the government doesn't act in time, common people will have to do something about their own safety. I pray that she succeeds in her endeavors."

Mr. Thakur has placed a photograph of his daughter on the family altar. The Bharatiya Janata Party has issued statements defending Ms. Thakur.

Her arrest led police investigators to several other suspects, including Lt. Colonel Shrikant Prasad Purohit. At the time of his arrest, Colonel Purohit was posted with the Indian Army's education corps, studying Chinese.

A prosecutor, Ajay Misar, said that Colonel Purohit had helped the bombers obtain money, arms and training. "He supplied six pistols and 196 cartridges to the other accused," Mr. Misar said in a telephone interview.

Dinesh Aggarwal, an inspector in the antiterrorism squad, said the suspects were part of a larger conspiracy. "Their precise role will be known after the investigation is completed," he said.



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The New York Times

The terrorist bombings have become a major political issue, with state elections scheduled for later this month and a national election expected next spring.

The opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, initially distanced itself from Ms. Thakur, but acknowledged that she had been part of its student wing after photographs of her with prominent party leaders were published. Recently, the party has defended her. And the party's chief minister of Gujarat State, Narendra Modi, accused the government of maligning the army's image by arresting Colonel Purohit as a pre-election ploy.

A version of this article appeared in print on November 12, 2008, on page A6 of the New York edition.

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