

Is Sikh terror being reactivated?

by Joseph Brewda

The Aug. 26 attempted assassination of an Indian newspaper editor in Vancouver, Canada, has fueled speculation that Sikh separatist terrorist networks may be reactivated in North America and elsewhere. This is the first important Sikh separatist incident in Canada since June 1985, when terrorists placed a bomb on an Air India flight originating in Toronto, killing all 329 aboard.

The Sikh separatists claim that the state of Punjab in India, where most members of the Sikh religious minority live, should break off from India and become an independent nation in its own right, "Khalistan."

Canada remains one of the most important centers of Sikh terrorism internationally. The exact relationship of the attempt to the Aug. 17 murder of Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq is now being investigated.

Tara Singh Hayer, publisher of the *Indo-Canadian Times*, was gunned down at his office by one Harkirat Singh Bagga, a 17-year-old associate of the International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF). No moderate himself, Hayer is a close associate of Dr. Jagjit Singh Chauhan of Reading, England, the chairman of the Khalistan National Council, who publicly claimed credit for the Oct. 31, 1984 assassination of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. In recent months, tensions between the two terrorist groupings have increased.

Bagga's father, Maj. Santokh Singh Bagga, is suspected of having helped plan the 1986 assassination of Indian General Viadya, who masterminded the 1984 Indian government raid on the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab, the religious center and safehouse of the self-styled "Khalistani" separatists. Following the Viadya murder, the Baggas, and Rajit Singh Kuki, another organizer of the assassination, fled to the United States. Kuki is being held in New Jersey pending extradition to India. Bagga slipped into Canada, where he has received political refugee status.

According to British sources, the ISYF attempt on Hayer is part of a broader plot targeting others, including Jagjit Singh Chauhan. The ISYF now accuses Chauhan's faction of collaboration with the Indian government. The pretext for this charge is events surrounding "Operation Black Thunder," the May 1988 raid on the Golden Temple which left 1,000 "Khalistani" terrorists dead or captured. Immediately prior to the raid, Jasbir Singh Roda, a Chauhan-affiliated

religious leader at the temple, left with his followers on a pilgrimage. Consequently, the Chauhan faction largely escaped.

The ISYF has its international base in Vancouver, and is led by Lakhbir Singh, the nephew of the slain separatist religious leader Sant Bhindranwale. Closely tied to Lakhbir Singh is Gurjit Singh, former leader of the All India Sikh Youth Federation (AISYF), a Bhindranwale relative by marriage; and Talwinder Singh Parmar, leader of the Babbar Khalsa terrorist grouping. All are based in Vancouver and have been repeatedly implicated in separatist assassinations and planned assassinations for years. The Baggas resided at Lakhbir Singh's home when they first moved to Canada.

Who benefits?

What is unclear about the recent assassination attempt, and the inter-terrorist rivalry, is its origin. The various Sikh terrorist organizations, like all such organizations, are the pawns of the competing intelligence agencies of various countries. The secret services of Britain, Canada, Russia, China, Pakistan, Israel, and the U.S. all have known capabilities among the Khalistanis, as does India itself. It can be assumed that the factional line-up among the Sikh terrorists reflects outside influence in ways which are not obvious. Whether or not one faction emerges over another may bear on which nation dominates the Khalistani terrorist movement, and who gets targeted by the terrorists.

The assassination of Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq, together with a dozen leaders of the Pakistani military and the U.S. ambassador in a plane crash last month, could have a serious impact on the Sikh terrorist scene. Among the dead were Pakistani Chief of Staff Akhtar Abdur Rahman, formerly the long-time head of Pakistani intelligence, and Lt. Gen. Mian Mohammed Afzool. Both, particularly Rahman, oversaw arms deliveries to the Afghan Mujahideen. It is well known that the same units that supply the Mujahideen also supply the Khalistani terrorists, who have training camps and safehouses throughout Pakistan.

The accelerated Soviet pressure on Pakistan through the Zia murder, and efforts to splinter the state along tribal lines, do not promise a let-up of Sikh operations against India, however. Indeed, there are indications that Moscow pressure on India through such terrorist operations may now dramatically increase. Pakistan has served as a buffer against Soviet pressure on India, despite the rivalry between the two nations.

The pressure on India seems to have been stepped up even before Zia was killed. On Aug. 2, Indian Home Minister Santosh Mohan Dev released internal Khalistani documents to the Indian Parliament that had been obtained from the May Golden Temple raid, which demonstrated new Sikh plans to assassinate Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Individuals involved in the plot included leading ISYF figures, and others, some of whom are based in Canada.