

FBI Warned Sikhs in the U.S. About Death Threats After Killing of Canadian Activist

The FBI visits took on a new urgency after Canada alleged Indian government involvement in the assassination of a Sikh separatist on Canadian soil.

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After the brazen killing of a high-profile Canadian Sikh activist in June, FBI agents visited several Sikh activists in California this summer with an alarming message: Their lives were also at risk.

The warnings have taken on a new urgency after Canada's bombshell revelation on Monday that it has credible intelligence pointing to Indian government involvement in the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Canadian citizen and advocate for an independent Sikh state, who was shot dead outside a Sikh temple in British Columbia.

Pritpal Singh, a political activist and U.S. citizen who is a coordinator for the American Sikh Caucus Committee, told The Intercept that he and two other Sikh Americans involved in political organizing in California received calls and visits from the FBI after Nijjar was killed.

"I was visited by two FBI special agents in late June who told me that they had received information that there was a threat against my life," said Singh. "They did not tell us specifically where the threat was coming from, but they said that I should be careful."

The two other Sikh activists, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, told The Intercept that they were also visited by the FBI around the same time as Singh. The FBI did not respond to a request for comment.

Sikhs throughout the U.S. have received police warnings about potential threats, said Sukhman Dhami, co-director of Ensaaf, a California-based nonprofit group that focuses on human rights in India, particularly in the Sikh-majority state of Punjab.

"We have also received messages that certain community leaders associated with

politics of Sikh self-determination have recently been visited by law enforcement and warned that they may be targets,” Dhami told The Intercept.

On Thursday, a [report](#) from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation revealed that Canada determined India’s culpability in the Nijjar killing based on signals and human intelligence, including the communications of Indian diplomats in Canada and information from an unnamed partner in the Five Eyes intelligence alliance comprising the U.S., Canada, the U.K., New Zealand, and Australia. Earlier this week, Canada expelled a top Indian diplomat who was the head of the Indian intelligence agency in the country.

India has been on the offensive, furiously rejecting the allegations as “absurd” and accusing Canada of patronizing Sikh militant and extremist groups. India’s counterterror agency on Thursday issued a [call for information about protesters](#) who allegedly tried to start a fire at the Indian consulate in San Francisco earlier this year.

The U.S. has expressed concern over the allegations, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday that the U.S. is cooperating with Canada in its investigation. In a statement this week, U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan said that India does not have “special exemption” to carry out actions like extrajudicial killings, for which the U.S. criticizes rival countries like Russia and China.

The U.S. is India’s largest trading partner — a relationship worth orders of magnitude more than Canada-India trade ties. Any targeted action by India on U.S. soil against Sikh dissidents could open a rift between the two countries as they build a coalition to confront China.

Sikh Americans who have received threats say they are not intimidated but want the U.S. government to take steps to protect them and stand up against what they characterize as an increasingly aggressive and authoritarian Indian government led by right-wing Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

“If India can target Canadians, Americans will be next,” Singh said. “This undermines our democratic institutions, curtails individual rights and freedoms, and challenges the national security and sovereignty of the United States.”

“From the Biden administration, we expect immediate support,” he added. “We do not want thoughts and prayers later.”

Prior Warnings

Before Nijjar was killed in June, Canadian intelligence officials warned him and five other Sikh community leaders that their lives were in danger, said Moninder Singh, a spokesperson for the British Columbia Gurdwaras Council who was among those issued warnings.

“They told us that we were at imminent risk of assassination, but they would never say specifically that the threat was from Indian intelligence or give us enough information to tell us where it was coming from,” said Singh.

Singh said that, in their meetings, agents from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police singled out Nijjar as particularly at risk. He had become a prominent figure in a diaspora campaign

advocating for Sikh independence from India; in 2020, the Indian National Investigation Agency described his political work as “trying to incite Sikhs to vote for secession, agitate against the government of India, and carry out violent activities.”

“I would debrief with him before and after every meeting,” said Singh, a longtime friend of Nijjar. “We were supposed to meet with them again the Monday morning after Father’s Day, but he was killed the night before.”

While Nijjar is seen as a leader in parts of the Canadian Sikh community, the Indian government has characterized him as a terrorist who was involved in a range of criminal activities in India from his home in British Columbia. He had been charged under the [controversial](#) counterterrorism law known as Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, which has been used by the Modi government to detain dissidents indefinitely without trial.

“It seems that there is a clear connection between the individual who was targeted and killed and his political opinions, namely his stance in favor of an independent Sikh state and his belief that he has a right to advocate for that position,” said Ensaaf’s Dhami about the circumstances around Nijjar’s killing.

Canada is home to a large, politically active Sikh diaspora with a small yet influential representation in the federal government.

Some Canadian Sikhs support a movement to establish an independent homeland called Khalistan in the Indian state of Punjab. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Indian government brutally suppressed a nationalist insurgency there; thousands of Sikhs were extrajudicially killed, tortured, or disappeared, and many who supported the movement fled to the U.S., Canada, and the U.K., where they became part of sizable diasporas. In 1985, during a period of heightened violence, Sikh separatists living in the West bombed an Air India flight en route from Montreal to London in what was the deadliest act of aviation terrorism at the time.

Though the Khalistan movement lost steam in recent years, separatists in the diaspora continue to fight for the cause, bringing them in frequent conflict with the Indian government.

Sikh activists have held referendums and protests at Indian consulates in Western countries, sometimes making provocative denunciations of the Indian government and vandalizing Indian government property. The U.S. State Department [condemned](#) vandalism by some protesters in San Francisco who attempted to set fire to part of the Indian consulate in July. The incident did not result in major damage or injuries.

India has accused Sikh separatists in the West, many of whom are Western citizens, of fomenting terrorism in India, threatening its diplomats, and endangering its consulates and foreign offices. In Canada, Indian calls on the Canadian government to crack down on Sikh political activism, including support for secessionism in India, have been largely rebuffed.

“The Khalistan movement today enjoys very little support in Punjab,” said Arjun Sethi, a human rights lawyer and law professor at Georgetown University. “Yet the Indian government continues to inflate its significance in order to galvanize their voter base, distract from their domestic failings, and further their national security agenda.”

Suspicious Deaths

Moninder Singh disputes how Nijjar has been characterized as a terrorist in the Indian press and on social media, stating that Nijjar had been committed to defending the rights of the Sikh minority in India and fighting for their political self-determination.

“In Hardeep’s case, they had been characterizing him in the press for some time as a terrorist and militant. After all that demonization, they have reacted to his death with celebration,” he said. “They’re taking it from the perspective that they’ve won and they’re doing a victory lap. But the way we see it, this issue is not over.”

In recent years, several members of the Sikh diaspora connected to the Khalistan movement have died in circumstances some have deemed suspicious. Among them is Avtar Singh Khanda, a [high-profile Sikh activist](#) in the U.K. whose family members [allege](#) was the victim of poisoning earlier this year. In 2022, a 75-year-old Sikh Canadian man named Ripudaman Singh Malik, who had been acquitted of involvement in the Air India bombing, was [shot to death](#) in front of his family business in British Columbia.

Popular media personalities linked to the Indian security establishment have also issued indirect threats in recent days against other people living in Canada, posting their personal information and addresses online.

There has been no confirmation of allegations that the Indian government was involved in recent deaths of activists in the Sikh diaspora or the threats against them, but Canada’s investigation into Nijjar’s killing could shed light on a larger pattern.

“Members of the Sikh diaspora have died under suspicious circumstances in the past,” said Sethi. “What makes this case so unique is that Canada is alleging that the Indian government was connected to the targeting, and that this conclusion was based on intelligence gathered by countries that are part of the Five Eyes alliance.”

Moninder Singh said Canada’s charge of Indian involvement in Nijjar’s death is evidence enough of what many members of the Sikh diaspora have long claimed: that the Indian government is targeting them on Western soil.

“The feeling in the Sikh community is that this is also a piece of validation for what we’ve been saying for many years, which is that this foreign interference exists here,” he said. “His death confirmed that in a very significant way.”

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