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Mastermind of Church bombing in Nepal arrested

Christians' fears little allayed; armed outfits mushrooming

By Sudeshna Sarkar

Compass Direct (09.09.2009) / HRWF Int. (10.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Pastor John Vanlalhriata was reading the Bible at his home in Kathmandu valley Sunday afternoon (Sept. 6) when a friend called to give him the news that electrified the Christian community.

"Ram Prasad Mainali has been arrested by police along with three more accomplices," the friend said. "Finally, our prayers have been answered."

The 36-year-old Mainali, who claims to have worked in the national army, became a household name in May after the little-known underground organization he headed, the Nepal Defense Army (NDA), claimed responsibility for placing a bomb in one of Nepal's oldest churches during mass, killing two women and a schoolgirl and injuring more than a dozen people.

Though police claimed a breakthrough in less than a fortnight, saying they had arrested a 27-year-old woman who planted the bomb in the prayer hall of the Catholic Assumption Church on May 23, the suspected mastermind remained elusive. Despite a red alert for Mainali's arrest, he remained at large in the former Hindu kingdom, continuing to intimidate Christians by ordering them to leave the country or face further violence. He was arrested on Saturday (Sept. 5) in Biratnagar.

The NDA, founded in 2006 after Nepal deposed King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah and became a secular republic, claimed to be grooming an army of suicide bombers in a bid to turn Nepal into a Hindu state again. Since last year, it began to strike in earnest in eastern Nepal, Mainali's home region.

In March 2008, the NDA bombed a mosque in eastern Nepal, killing two people at prayer, and four months later it gunned down a Catholic priest, the Rev. John Prakash Moyalan, at his residence.

"I thanked God when I heard Mainali had been arrested," Pastor Vanlalhriata of the Believers' Church in Kathmandu told Compass. "I thought Mainali would now learn that it was not good to persecute the church and threaten God's people. But then I was struck by a different thought - who knows, maybe he would be released soon."

After the initial joy, that thought is the prospect haunting Nepal's Christian community – that Mainali and his accomplices could be released soon, either because of legal loopholes or the culture of impunity pervading Nepal since 1996, when Maoist guerrillas began an armed revolt and triggered grave human rights violations for a decade.

"We will have to wait and watch what happens now," said Balan Joseph, a 42-year-old garment factory employee who lost his teenage daughter, Celeste, in the bombing; eight days later, his wife Buddha Laxmi succumbed to an internal hemorrhage from the blast. "Mainali's arrest doesn't mean his gang has been wiped out. Unless the government takes tough action, the morale of all potential killers will rise, and recruits will continue to flock to these gangs."

Christians have been further anguished by the revelation that Mainali had been arrested previously for an explosion. There were no casualties, and a court granted him bail. On being freed, he promptly went underground, resurfacing Saturday (Sept. 5) in the tea garden district of Jhapa, in eastern Nepal, when police arrested him on a tipoff.

Chirendra Satyal, spokesperson at the Assumption Church, said the possibility of release is the overriding concern. He said a priest told him, only half-jokingly, "I hope the authorities don't release him again."

Satyal said he also feels that the threat to Christians has not ended.

"There is a culture of impunity in Nepal," he told Compass. "This government may fall, and the new one that replaces it may decide to release Mainali. Or he can have a successor stepping into his shoes."

Ongoing Insecurity

A sense of insecurity still pervades the Assumption Church, which has not relaxed safety measures even after the arrest. Cars are not allowed inside the compound, and handbags have to be left at the gate. Professional security guards have been employed, reinforced by policemen deployed by the government.

The arrests have also failed to erase the terror from the hearts of those who were present in the church on that fatal day, especially the children. While widower Joseph said God has given him strength to bear his loss, his surviving children – Chelsea, 11, and Sylvester, 9, are still traumatized.

"My friends told me about the arrest," Chelsea told Compass. "But I am still afraid. So is my brother. And though he too knows about the arrest, he has not talked about it with us."

On Tuesday, authorities brought Mainali to Kathmandu valley, and he appeared before the chief district officer, who gave police permission to hold him in remand for 10 days for further investigation.

"We feel the threat of religious attacks has ended," said Police Superintendent Devendra Subedi, whose team arrested Mainali. "A day later, we also arrested Vinod Pandey, who headed another underground organization, the Ranavir Sena, which too was demanding the restoration of Hinduism as the state religion. With the heads in the police net, the outfits are bound to collapse."

Pandey, also arrested from eastern Nepal with an aide, was reportedly planning a series of bomb attacks in the capital and three other major towns: Pokhara, a popular tourist destination, and Biratnagar and Birgunj, two key trade hubs.

Dr. K.B. Rokaya, general secretary of the National Council of Churches of Nepal (NCCN), said the arrests of the militant group leaders will not resolve the problems of violence in Nepal.

"There are over 100 armed groups in Nepal that are engaged in extortion, abductions and killings," said Rokaya, who is also a member of Nepal's National Human Rights Commission. "Nepal passed through a decade of armed conflict to reach a transitional period where there is still political instability due to the weak government. Many armed groups are trying to take advantage of the vacuum. It's not only Christians who are suffering, the entire nation is."

In the Terai, lowlands in southern Nepal running across the open border with neighboring India, armed gangs have mushroomed since the fall of the royal government three years ago. The Believers' Church is concentrated there. It is part of Christian Unity, an umbrella of churches of different denominations on the plains that the NDA has repeatedly threatened.

The NCCN is putting its hope in a new constitution being drafted by a 601-member Constituent Assembly in consultation with different political parties, organizations and communities. It is scheduled to be presented in May 2010. The NCCN has submitted its recommendations for protection of religious minorities to the Constituent Assembly, as well as to Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal and President Ram Baran Yadav.

The NCCN's Rokaya said the recommendations can be summed up in four points: freedom to practice the religion of choice; freedom to change it (a tacit reference to past laws that made conversion a punishable offence); freedom not to practice any religion; and the state not interfering in religious matters.

Nepal 'regrets' attack on priests

By Anbarasan Ethirajan

BBC News (08.09.2009) / HRWF Int. (09.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Nepal has expressed regret over an attack on Friday on two Indian priests by protesters at one of Nepal's holiest Hindu sites, the Pashupatinath temple.

Culture Minister Minendra Rijal said the priests' attackers would be found and punished.

The protesters are backed by the Maoist party and are demanding the appointment of Nepali priests.

On Saturday the Indian priests, who had been beaten severely, started work at the temple amid tight security.

Moves for change

Flanked by helmeted police, the two priests from southern India went through the rituals necessary for their first day at the temple in the Nepalese capital, Kathmandu.

Police said they cordoned off the area to prevent possible violence.

Prayers at the temple have traditionally been led by high caste Brahmin priests recruited from southern India with the consent of the king of Nepal.

With the abolition of the monarchy last year, there were moves to change the old system. The Maoists want Nepali priests to do the job.

The attack on Indian priests has triggered an immediate response from neighbouring India.

"We are aware that there is a Maoist pressure on the temple authorities there to prevent the Indian priests from conducting the religious ceremonies," Indian Foreign Minister SM Krishna said.

"We are in touch with the government of Nepal."

Now the Nepalese authorities say they have taken steps to ensure the safety of the priests and resolve the problem.

They have appealed to the protesters to co-operate with the government in maintaining harmony.

It is obvious that they want to avoid any diplomatic fallout with India because of the incident.

But it is not clear whether the Maoists will listen.

As law and order breaks down, Christians come under attack

Compass Direct (30.07.2009) / HRWF Int. (31.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Three years after a pro-democracy movement led to the proclamation of Nepal as a secular state, some Christians say they are in greater peril than ever.

They are now being targeted by militant Hindu organizations that blame the church for the abolition of Hinduism as the state religion and the end of monarchy. A little-known, shadowy organization that claimed to be building an army of suicide bombers has achieved notoriety with two brutal attacks on Catholics in two years.

Since May, when the Nepal Defense Army (NDA) – which claims to have links with militant Hindu organizations across the border in India – struck one of Kathmandu valley's oldest and biggest churches, the group has threatened to drive all Christians from the country. And now a group claiming to be the parent organization of the NDA has warned that on Aug. 10 it will start a "Save the Hindu nation" movement.

Police say Ram Prasad Mainali, the elusive NDA chief, hired a local woman to plant a bomb at the Assumption Church on May 23 during mass. Two women and a schoolgirl were killed in the attack. The NDA also claimed responsibility for killing a Catholic priest, John Prakash Moyalan, in southern Nepal last year.

Though police have issued an alert for his arrest, Mainali continues to evade capture, and it is murmured that he has political connections. Undeterred by the hunt, he continues to threaten the Christian community.

Last month, the Rev. Pius Perumana, a senior Catholic priest, received a phone call.

"The caller said he was in charge of the NDA in Kathmandu valley," said Perumana of Ishalaya Catholic Church, located in Godavari on the southern rim of the capital. "However, I recognized the voice. It was Ram Prasad Mainali himself."

Godavari is an important Catholic hub that includes a Catholic pastoral center, a shelter for destitute, HIV-infected women and homeless children, a day care center and a small clinic.

Perumana said he has received at least five threatening calls from the Hindu supremacist ordering him to close all Christian organizations and leave Nepal, he said. The NDA leader has also been calling Protestant pastors, demanding money. In districts outside Kathmandu, where security is weak, some pastors are said to have paid up out of fear.

Mainali's success has spawned at least one copycat extortion attempt.

"At least one pastor in Kathmandu has received an extortion letter," said Chirendra Satyal, spokesman of the Assumption Church. "The writer claimed to be the vice-president of a Hindu group, the National Defence Party (NDP), calling it the mother organization of which Mainali's NDA was the military arm. The pastor was asked to pay 7.5 million Nepalese rupees [US\$98,190]."

The letter warned that starting on Aug. 10, the underground organization will start a "Save the Hindu nation" movement.

No Christian Corpses

Until three years ago, Nepal used to be the only Hindu kingdom in the world where Christians faced discrimination by the state, ostracization by society and imprisonment if found guilty of preaching Christ.

Things officially changed in 2006 after a pro-democracy movement led to the ouster of the army-backed regime of Hindu King Gyanendra, and Parliament proclaimed the Himalayan kingdom a secular, federal state.

But three years later, nothing has changed in reality, said the Rev. Nayaran Sharma, bishop of the Protestant Believers' Church.

"We bought a plot of land in a forest in Gorkha district in western Nepal so that we could have an official graveyard," Sharma told Compass. "But when the locals heard of it, they made us return the land, saying they did not want corpses in their midst as they would attract evil."

Even three years after Nepal became secular, Christians have to be buried clandestinely on private property with the danger of graves being dug up, he said.

"Churches have not yet been registered by the government, and so we don't get state assistance like the Hindu temples and Muslim mosques do," Sharma said. "Temples are provided free land, electricity and water; the madrassas – the Muslim schools – receive state funding, and the government subsidizes the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca."

Christians make up about 2.5 percent of Nepal's 25 million population. Nearly 75 percent of the population in Nepal is Hindu.

Nepal's Christians little consoled by arrest in church bombing

Militant group threatens more attacks unless non-Hindus leave country within month

By Sudeshna Sarkar

Compass Direct (02.06.2009) / HRWF Int. (05.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Vikash and Deepa Patrick had been married for nearly four months before the young couple living in Patna in eastern India managed to go on their honeymoon here. The decision to come to Nepal for four days of fun and sight-seeing would be a choice the groom will rue the rest of his life.

Vikash Patrick's 19-year-old bride died while praying at the Assumption Church in Kathmandu valley's Lalitpur district, the largest Catholic church in Nepal, in an anti-Christian bombing on May 23, the day they were to return home. Claiming responsibility for the violence was the Nepal Defense Army (NDA), a group wishing to restore Hinduism as the official religion of Nepal.

Patrick and two of his cousins also were injured in the explosion that ripped through the church, where nearly 400 people had turned up for a morning service.

A dazed Sun Bahadur Tamang, a 51-year-old Nepali Christian who had also gone to the church that day with his wife and daughter, pieced together the incident while awaiting treatment in a private hospital.

"We were in the prayer hall when a woman who looked to be in her 30s came and sat down next to my wife," Tamang told Compass. "Then she got up and asked us where the toilet was. We said it was near the entrance, and she left, leaving her blue handbag behind. A little later, there was a stunning bang, and I fell on my daughter. People screamed, there was a stampede, and I couldn't find my wife. I also realized I had lost my hearing."

Deepa Patrick and a 15-year-old schoolgirl, Celeste Joseph, died in the explosion while 14 others, mostly women and teenagers, were injured. Another woman, Celeste's mother Buddha Laxmi Joseph, died of a hemorrhage yesterday.

In the church hall, police found remains of the handbag as well as a pressure cooker. From 1996 to 2006, when Nepal's underground Maoist party fought a guerrilla war against the state to overthrow monarchy and transform the world's only Hindu kingdom into a secular republic, pressure cookers became deadly weapons in guerrilla hands. Packed with batteries, a detonator, explosives and iron nails, pressure cookers became lethal home-made bombs.

Also found scattered in the hall and outside the church were hundreds of green leaflets by an organization that until two years ago no one knew existed. Signed in the name of Ram Prasad Mainali, a 38-year-old Hindu extremist from eastern Nepal, the leaflets claimed the attack to be the handiwork of the NDA.

"A day after the explosion, a man called me up, saying he was the vice-president of the NDA," said Bishop Narayan Sharma of the Protestant Believers' Church in Nepal. "Though he was polite and expressed regret for the death of innocent people, he said his organization wanted the restoration of Hinduism as the state religion."

Soon after the phone call, the NDA sent a fresh statement to Nepal's media organizations

with a distinctly militant tone. In the statement, the NDA gave "Nepal's 1 million Christians a month's time to stop their activities and leave the country" or else it would plant a million bombs in churches across the country.

"There is fear in the Christian community," said Chirendra Satyal, spokesman for the Assumption Church. "Now we have police guarding our church, and its gates are closed. People coming in are asked to open their bags for security checks. It's unheard of in the house of God."

Suspect Arrested

An unexpected development occurred today as last rites were performed at the church on Joseph, the mother of the 15-year-old girl who also died in the explosion.

"At around 3 a.m. Tuesday, we arrested the woman who planted the bomb in the church," Deputy Inspector-General of Police Kuber Rana told Compass.

Rana, who was part of a three-member police team formed to investigate the attack, identified the woman as a 27-year-old Nepalese, Sita Shrestha nee Thapa. Thapa allegedly confessed to police that she was a member of an obscure group, Hindu Rashtra Bachao Samiti (The Society to Save the Hindu Nation), and had planted the bomb inspired by the NDA.

The NDA made a small splash in 2007, a year after Nepal's last king, Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah, who had tried to seize absolute power with the help of the army, was forced to step down after nationwide protests. The cornered king had to reinstate a parliament that had been dissolved several years ago, and the resurrected house promptly decided to end his pretensions as the incarnation of a Hindu god by declaring Nepal to be a secular country.

Soon after that, a man walked into the office of a Nepalese weekly in Kathmandu and claimed to have formed the NDA, a group of former army soldiers, policemen and victims of the Maoists. Its aim was to build up an underground army that would wage a Hindu "jihad." The man, who called himself Parivartan – meaning change – also claimed the NDA was nurturing suicide bombers.

According to police, Parivartan is the name assumed by a 38-year-old man from Morang district in eastern Nepal – Ram Prasad Mainali. The NDA began to acquire a reputation after it set off a bomb in 2007 at the Kathmandu office of the Maoists, who had laid down arms and returned to mainstream politics. In 2008, it stepped up its pro-Hindu war, bombing two mosques in southern Nepal and killing two Muslims at prayer.

It also targeted a church in the east, a newspaper office and the interim Parliament on the day the latter officially announced Nepal a secular republic.

Though police began a half-hearted hunt for Mainali, the NDA struck again last July, killing a 62-year-old Catholic priest, the Rev. John Prakash, who was also the principal of the Don Bosco School run in Sirsiya town in southern Nepal by the Salesian fathers.

"Extortion and intimidation are the two prime motives of the NDA," said a Catholic church official who requested anonymity for security reasons. "Father Prakash had withdrawn a large sum of money to pay salaries as well as for some ongoing construction. Someone in the bank must have informed the NDA. It has good contacts, it knows who we are and our phone numbers."

Small churches in southern and eastern Nepal, which are often congregations of 40-50 people who worship in rented rooms, have been terrified by threats and demands for

money, said representatives of the Christian community. Some congregations have reportedly paid extortion sums to avert attacks from the NDA.

"Though the NDA does not seem to have a well chalked-out strategy, its activities indicate it receives support from militant Hindu outfits in India," said Bishop Sharma of the Protestant Believers' Church. "It has been mostly active in the south and east, in areas close to the Indian border. Bellicose Hindu groups from north India are likely to support their quest for a Hindu Nepal."

While Thapa has been charged with murder, Rana said police are also hunting for NDA chief Mainali. And the arrest of Thapa has not lightened the gloom of the Christian community nor lessened its fears.

"There have been instances galore of police arresting innocent people and forcing them to confess," said Bishop Sharma. "Look at the case of Manja Tamang."

Tamang, a Believers' Church pastor, was released this week after serving nine years in prison for murder that his co-religionists say he did not commit. Tamang staunchly protests his innocence with his church standing solidly behind him, saying he was framed.

Nepal PM backtracks in priest row

BBC (07.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (14.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Nepalese Prime Minister Prachanda has cancelled the appointment of two leading priests at the country's holiest Hindu temple.

Their nominations last week led to protests by junior priests angered over what they said was the breaking of a centuries-old custom.

Senior priests at the Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu traditionally come from among high caste Hindus in India.

But the government said it wanted them to come from Nepal instead.

'Harmony'

"I have cancelled the appointment of the new priests immediately and urge the old priests to continue with the religious ceremonies," Prachanda told the constituent assembly on Wednesday.

He also ordered the temple authorities to have regular prayers performed by the former priests until the new incumbents are appointed - in the interests of "religious harmony".

The government took over the appointment process following the abolition of the monarchy, which used to perform the role of approving Indian candidates. Prachanda is now a patron of the temple.

The temple - which is listed as a World Heritage Site - is visited by thousands of pilgrims from Nepal and India every year.

Riot police were last week deployed at the temple to stop protesters angered over the move. They accused the government of "appointing their own people".

Priests at Pashupatinath have for the last 250 years been led by high caste Brahmins recruited from southern India.

The move to get rid of them was seen as a reflection of wider changes in the past year with the former Maoist rebels coming to power.

Last Thursday, Nepal's Supreme Court directed the temple authorities not to let the newly appointed Nepali priests perform rituals.

The temple complex sits on a sacred river on the edge of Kathmandu and rises up from the bank amid a mass of pagoda-style buildings.

Protests erupt over Maoist appointments at Nepal temple

EarthTimes (06.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (19.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Hundreds of protestors burnt tyres and blocked streets in Kathmandu Tuesday as protests escalated over the Maoist-led government's appointment of top clergy at the country's largest Hindu temple. The protests followed demonstrations by junior priests at the Pashupatinath temple objecting to the appointment of new high priests by the Young Communist League.

Hundreds of protestors, including junior priests known as Bhandaris, imposed a traffic blockade and burnt tyres.

"Down with the Maoists, prime minister leave the country," the protestors chanted.

"The protests will continue until the Maoists stop making political appointments at the temple," organizers said.

Police said the protests were generally peaceful.

Last week, Nepal's Supreme Court issued a stay on the appointments and said prayers at the temple must be conducted by old priests who are from South India.

But the government ignored the court order.

"The appointments were made with good intentions, but the issue is now being politicized," Minister for Information and Communications Krishna Bahadur Mahara said.

"No one and no law can stop us from implementing our decision which is for the good of the country," Mahara said.

The Indian priests known as Bhatta have been at the helm of worship at Pashupatinath temple for nearly 200 years.

They resigned last week citing serious differences with temple management installed by the Nepalese government.

Even former King Gyanendra broke his silence to issue an appeal not to politicize events at the temple.

Thousands of devotees visit the Pashupatinath Temple dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva each day.

It is listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.
