India: Charges of BJP's complicity in murder of Christians rock government

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The brutal murder of an Australian missionary and his two young sons--the climax to months of verbal and physical attacks on India's Christian minority--has shaken India's coalition government, which is led by the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata or Indian People's Party.

Graham Stewart Staines, who had ministered to a leper community in the eastern state of Orissa for more than three decades, and his nine- and seven-year-old sons were burned to death late on the evening of January 23, when a mob of Hindu nationalists torched the jeep in which they were sleeping. Local police have blamed the killings on members of the Barang Dal, the youth organisation of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (the World Hindu Council), and have reportedly arrested some 50 Hindu chauvinists for the atrocity. But the Barang Dal activist who is said to have masterminded the attack, so as to further the aggressive campaign he has led against Christian missionary work in the area, has thus far escaped capture.

Prime Minister Atal Vajapayee has promised "no mercy" will be given those responsible for the murders and last week his government announced that a Supreme Court justice will mount a judicial inquiry into the events in Orissa.

But L.K. Advani, the Home Minister and thus the person officially responsible for internal security, has more or less acted as a defence attorney for the Barang Dal. Speaking two days after the killings, he assured reporters that it would be found that Barang Dal was not responsible. "They have denied it," affirmed Advani. He then condemned the BJP's political opponents for trying to "get political mileage" out of the murders.

Criticism of the BJP's organisational links to the Barang Dal and failure to take swift action against the growing wave of attacks on India's Christian minority have even come from several of the BJP's coalition partners. And the BJP parliamentary minister, lifelong RSS member Madanlal Khurna, has said that "a very senior Home Ministry official had confirmed the involvement of the Bajrang Dal in the Graham Staines murder."

The ties between the BJP and the VHP and Barang Dal are both intimate and well-known. All three are affiliated to the fascistic Rashtriya Sevak Sangh (RSS), an ostensibly cultural organisation, that is the axis of a network of Hindu chauvinist organisations. The vast majority of the BJP's cadre are RSS members. In the early 1990s, Advani, then the BJP's parliamentary leader, joined with the VHP in leading a campaign for the demolition of an Ayodhya mosque said to be on the site of the birthplace of the mythical Hindu god Ram. The campaign culminated in the mosque's destruction at the hands of Hindu chauvinists and the worst communal rioting in India since the 1947 partition of the subcontinent.

Both the BJP and RSS espouse the chauvinist doctrine of Hindutva, which affirms that India is a Hindu nation. Declared the late RSS chieftain and ideologue Golwalkar, "In this country Hindus alone are national and Muslims and others if not actually anti-national, are at least outside the body of the nation."

The claim that India's Muslims and Christians are aliens is, of course, utterly bogus and reactionary: the Muslim presence in India dates back more than a thousand years and the Christian close to two thousand.

During Christmas week, there was an orgy of anti-Christian violence in the BJP-ruled state of Gujarat. Popular revulsion over the razing of 30 churches and other acts of violence forced Prime Minister Vajpayee to make a tour of the strife-torn Dangs district.

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But Vajpayee coupled various statements criticising the anti-Christian attacks with a reaffirmation of his personal support for the RSS and a call for a national debate on religious conversions. A longstanding Hindu chauvinist goal has been to restrict, if not entirely outlaw, religious conversions.

The Hindu chauvinists' veneration of Hinduism as India's "national" ideology has above all been directed against combating the internationalist doctrine of socialism and other progressive ideas that were first developed in the West. But the opposition to religious conversions is also bound up with the RSS's and BJP's defence of caste privilege. Both the BJP and RSS are rooted in sections of the urban and rural petty bourgeoisie who cling to caste as a social and psychological bulwark to withstand the vicissitudes of the capitalist market and who feel threatened by the growing assertiveness of the most impoverished layers of Indian society.

For centuries, religious conversions in India have been associated with attempts of the former Untouchables (Dalits) and other historically disadvantaged groups to escape the disabilities of caste oppression. Such conversions, however, have done little to advance the cause of the converts, let alone eradicate caste oppression. While Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism all profess values that are in opposition to the caste ideology of traditional Hinduism, in practice India's Christian, Muslim and Sikh elites have all practised and continue to practise caste oppression.

The Hindu chauvinists' attacks on the Christians are aimed at channelling mounting social discontent in a reactionary direction. Thus while the BJP government acts on behalf of Indian capital to forge ever closer relations with the transnationals and foreign banks, the Hindu chauvinists fan xenophobia. Is it no accident that the anti-Christian campaign intensified following last November's routing of the BJP in four state elections. Moreover, there is a clear political subtext to the anti-Christian campaign: Sonia Gandhi, the president of the Congress party, the BJP's principal political rival, is an Italian-born Roman Catholic.

For its part, the Shiv Sena, the Maharashtra-based ally of the BJP, responded to growing popular disenchantment with its administration of Maharashtra, by organising attacks against the screening of the "Fire", which depicts a love-affair between two women, and by threatening to prevent a series of Indian-Pakistani cricket matches.

The political support for such provocations is waning, however. For its own reasons, the BJP government, which last May stoked anti-Pakistani fervour with nuclear tests, was compelled to threaten its Shiv Sena allies with reprisals if they made good on their threats to prevent the Pakistani cricket team from playing in India. Then, in a transparent attempt to save face and shift public attention, the Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray announced January 30 that he was sacking Maharashtra's Shiv Sena chief minister.

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