

India: Police and Hindu supremacists engage in provocations following Varanasi bombings

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At least 20 people were killed and more than 100 injured in two separate bomb blasts on March 7 in the Hindu holy city of Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh (UP).

The first bomb exploded around 6 p.m. in the crowded Sankat Mochan temple, setting off a stampede among evening worshippers, resulting in additional injuries. The Sankat Mochan temple, which is devoted to the Hindu monkey-god Hanuman, is Varanasi's second most popular temple. The second bomb exploded a little later inside a waiting room at the nearby railway station. It caused 11 immediate deaths and left tens of people injured.

The Indian dailies the *Hindu* and the *Telegraph* reported an additional bomb blast (without reporting any casualties) inside the Delhi-bound Shiv-Ganga Express train, which was parked at the platform when the bomb exploded in the waiting room.

Under the approving headline, "Hours after the bomb attacks, police hit back," The *Hindu* reported that the police seized on the charged political atmosphere created by the slaughter of civilians in the blasts to carry out the extra-judicial killing of three suspected members of Lashkar-e-Taiba, an Islamic fundamentalist group that is based in, and opposed to Indian government control of, Kashmir.

A joint force of Jammu and Kashmir and UP police cornered, then executed a 42-year-old "suspected senior Lashkar organiser," Mohammad Salim bin-Aziz, in the UP capital Lucknow. Meanwhile, the Delhi police anti-terrorist squad killed two "terrorists" one of whom, Ghulam Yazdani, was supposedly the organiser of the Dhaka-based cell of Lashkar. However, the same report also quoted a senior official as saying, "there is no evidence to suggest either group had any direct contact with the Varanasi bombers".

The police have released sketches of two men wanted

for the bomb blasts, who they say are likely Lashkar-e-Taiba members

According to Reuters, however, a previously unknown organisation, Lashkar-e-Kahar, has claimed responsibility for both blasts in Varanasi and promised more attacks if the Indian government does not "stop excesses" in its Kashmir military operations. As in India's troubled north-east, Indian security forces have routinely run roughshod over basic civil rights, including mounting deadly attacks on civilians, in the name of fighting terrorism and separatism in the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Police previously linked Lashkar-e-Taiba to bombings at a New Delhi market last November that killed some 60 people and injured over 100. The police claimed that the Varanasi bombs were hidden inside pressure-cookers in a fashion similar to one of the blasts in New Delhi.

UP Chief Minister and Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav told reporters that the blasts smacked of a "deep-rooted conspiracy," but offered no evidence.

The Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its sister communal organisations in the "Sangh Parivar", the RSS and VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad or The World Hindu Council), immediately seized on the Varanasi atrocity to try to whip up communal tensions. L.K. Advani, the opposition leader in the Lok Sabha (national parliament), blamed the blasts on Pakistan, which has provided political and logistical support to the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir, and on the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) federal government. Advani claimed that by indulging in "competitive-minority appeasement," Congress had created conditions in which "jihadi-terrorism" could flourish.

The right-wing Hindu organisations called for the observation of a bandh (stoppage or shut down) in Varanasi and Lucknow on March 8 but this call evoked a mixed response, with shops in several areas of Lucknow refusing to close.

Since falling from power in May 2004, the BJP and its sister Sangh Parivar organisations have been in disarray. One element in this crisis has been their failure to generate popular support for key parts of their Hindu supremacist agenda, such as the building of a Hindu temple at the site of the razed Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya. The lack of popular enthusiasm for their Muslim-baiting has only made the Hindu supremacists more desperate to stoke communal strife.

By whipping up anti-Muslim sentiment over the Varanasi bombings, the BJP and Hindu right are seeking to turn public attention from discussion of a far bigger crime—the pogrom carried out against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, which killed some 2,000 people and left upward of 100,000 homeless.

On March 3, Justice U.C. Banerjee handed over to the Railway Board his final report into the February 27, 2002 fire that erupted on the Ahmedabad-bound Sabramati Express when it was at or near the train station in Godhra, Gujarat. Banerjee declared: “It was not a deliberately inflicted fire but an accidental one.”

The train fire, which killed 59 people (many of them VHP activists), was utilised by RSS and VHP activists and by the BJP Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, to incite the Gujarat pogrom. Modi and other Hindu supremacists claimed that a coach carrying mainly VHP activists had been set ablaze by Muslims and that Hindus were, therefore, justified in holding all Muslims responsible for the fire deaths.

After analysing the fire, police evidence and the testimony of eye-witnesses, Banerjee found the claim of a Muslim attack to be without foundation. Among other things, there was no mob at the station, only on-lookers; the doors of the coach were not sealed; and many of those on the coach were not VHP activists.

As would be expected, the BJP and its allies have denounced the Banerjee Commission report. Speaking in the aftermath of the Varanasi bombings, BJP leader Advani told the right-wing *Indian Express* that the “general atmosphere created in the past few days has only strengthened the [Islamic] fundamentalist forces”—a not so subtle reference to Banerjee’s

findings.

The BJP has argued that the Banerjee Commission, which was formed at the initiative of Railway Minister Lalu Yadav, a longstanding political rival, is politically motivated and that another commission, the Nanavati-Shah Commission set up by Gujarat Chief Minister Modi (the very individual who has been accused of complicity in the anti-Muslim pogrom), is the sole legitimate body for investigating the cause of the train fire.

A VHP supporter has gone to court seeking an injunction barring public release of the Banerjee Commission’s final report on the spurious grounds that it is an illegitimate inquiry.



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