

# Indian official plotted to assassinate Sikh separatist leader in New York, US prosecutors say



FILE - Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, left, speaks, Sept. 26, 2014 in New York. India has set up a high-level inquiry after U.S. authorities raised concerns with New Delhi that its government may have had knowledge of a plot to kill the Sikh separatist leader on American soil, an Indian official said on Wednesday, Nov. 29, 2023. (AP Photo/Craig Ruttle, File)



FILE- The countries' flags are seen on the table during a meeting with India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin at the Pentagon, Monday, Sept. 26, 2022, in Washington. India has set up a high-level inquiry after U.S. authorities raised concerns with New Delhi that its government may have had knowledge of a plot to kill a Sikh separatist leader Gurpatwant Singh Pannun on American soil, an Indian official said on Wednesday, Nov. 29, 2023. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

**AP**

**By Ashok Sharma and Larry Neumeister**

**November 29, 2023**

**NEW YORK (AP) —** An Indian government official directed a plot to assassinate a prominent Sikh separatist leader living in New York City, U.S. prosecutors said

Wednesday as they announced charges against a man they said was part of the thwarted murder conspiracy.

U.S. officials became aware last spring of the plot to kill Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, who advocated for the creation of a sovereign Sikh state and is considered a terrorist by the Indian government.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration interceded and set up a sting, with an undercover agent posing as a hitman, after the conspirators recruited an international narcotics trafficker in the plot to murder the activist for \$100,000.

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The Indian government official was not charged or identified by name in an indictment unsealed Wednesday but was described as a “senior field officer”

with responsibilities in “security management” and “intelligence” said to have previously served in India’s Central Reserve Police Force.

The charges were aimed at a different person, Nikhil Gupta, 52, a citizen of India who was accused of murder-for-hire and conspiracy to commit murder-for-hire. The charges carry a potential penalty of up to 20 years in prison.

“The defendant conspired from India to assassinate, right here in New York City, a U.S. citizen of Indian origin who has publicly advocated for the establishment of a sovereign state for Sikhs, an ethnoreligious minority group in India,” U.S. Attorney Damian Williams, the chief federal prosecutor in Manhattan, said in a news release.

“We will not tolerate efforts to assassinate U.S. citizens on U.S. soil, and stand ready to investigate, thwart, and prosecute anyone who seeks to harm and silence Americans here or abroad,” he added.

The charges were the second major recent accusation of complicity of Indian government officials in attempts to kill Sikh separatist figures living in North America.

In September, [Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau](#) said there were credible allegations that the Indian government had links to the assassination in that country of [Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar](#). India rejected the accusation as absurd, but Canada expelled a top Indian diplomat and India responded with the same measure.

Before the U.S. indictment was unsealed Wednesday, India announced it had set up a high-level inquiry after U.S. authorities raised concerns with New Delhi that its government may have had knowledge of the plot to kill Pannun.

The U.S. side shared some information and India “takes such inputs seriously since they impinge on our national security interests as well, and relevant departments were already examining the issue,” a statement by External Affairs Ministry spokesman Arindam Bagchi said.

Gupta was arrested June 30 in the Czech Republic through a bilateral extradition treaty between the U.S. and the Czech Republic, prosecutors said. It was not immediately clear when he might be brought to the United States and whether he has secured legal representation in the United States.

The case is particularly sensitive given the high priority President Joe Biden has placed on improving ties with India and courting it to be a major partner in the push to counter China’s increasing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

The White House declined to comment directly on the charges against Gupta, but said administration officials acted quickly.

“When we were made aware of the fact that the defendant in this case had credibly indicated that he was directed to arrange the murder by an individual who is assessed to be an employee of the Indian Government, we took this information very seriously and engaged in direct conversations with the Indian government at the highest levels to express our concern,” White House National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said in a statement.

Trudeau said in a statement that Canadian authorities had been working closely with American officials since August.

“The news coming out of the United States further underscores what we’ve been talking about since the very beginning which is that India needs to take this seriously, the Indian government needs to work with us,” he said.

Pannun has been a leading organizer of the so-called Khalistan referendum, inviting Sikhs worldwide to vote on whether India’s Punjab state should become an independent nation based on religion. Organizers of the nonbinding referendum hope to present the results to the U.N. General Assembly in about two years. He is also general counsel with the Sikhs for Justice organization, which was banned by India in 2019.

“I’m not afraid of the physical death,” Pannun said in a telephone interview Wednesday with The Associated Press.

If his death is the cost of running a campaign to organize the voting in Khalistan on whether Indian governed Punjab should be an independent country, “I’m willing to pay that price,” he said.

“We have never incited, provoked or promoted violence as a means to achieve any political goal,” Pannun said.

“India has proved they believe in violence and bullets to stop” the campaign, he said, referring also to the assassination of Nijjar in Canada.

The indictment said Gupta was recruited last May by the unidentified Indian government employee to orchestrate the assassination of Pannun, who was only identified in court papers as the “Victim.”

Gupta contacted a criminal associate to help find a hitman to carry out the killing, but that person happened to be a confidential source working with the DEA. The confidential source then introduced Gupta to a purported hitman, who was actually a DEA agent, the indictment said.

In June, the Indian government employee gave Gupta the home address of Pannun, his phone numbers and details about his daily conduct, including surveillance photographs, which Gupta then passed along to the undercover DEA agent, the indictment said.

It said Gupta directed the undercover agent to carry out the murder as soon as possible, but also warned the agent not to commit the killing around the time of anticipated engagements between high-level U.S. and Indian officials.

According to the indictment, Gupta told the undercover DEA agent the day after Nijjar's murder in Canada that Nijjar "was also the target" and "we have so many targets."

He added that in light of Nijjar's murder, there was "now no need to wait" in carrying out the New York assassination, the indictment said. Later, the Indian government official behind the New York assassination plot sent Gupta a news article about the New York assassination target and messaged Gupta saying his killed was a "priority now," the indictment said.

The White House first became aware of the plot in late July, according to a senior administration official.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive exchanges with Indian government, said White House national security adviser

Jake Sullivan met with his Indian counterpart, Ajit Doval, and underscored that India needed to investigate and hold those responsible accountable.

Sullivan also made clear that U.S. needed an assurance that this would not happen again and warned that another episode could permanently damage the trust established between our two countries, the official said.

Biden then asked CIA Director William Burns to contact his counterpart and travel to India to make it clear that the United States would not tolerate such activities and that his administration expected accountability.

Biden also raised the matter directly with Prime Minister Narendra Modi when they met at the Group of 20 Summit in September in New Delhi.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Sullivan raised the issue with Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar when he visited Washington in September around the time of the annual U.N. General Assembly.

In October, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines travelled to India to share information with Indian government officials to aid their internal investigation.

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Sharma reported from New Delhi. Associated Press writers Aamer Madhani and Eric Tucker in Washington, Rob Gillies in Toronto and AP Diplomatic Writer Matthew Lee in Brussels contributed to this report.