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Court in India Orders Archaeological Study of Disputed Holy Site

By THE NEW YORK TIMES

BANGALORE, India, March 5 — A court in northern India ordered archaeologists today to begin excavating a holy site in Ayodhya next week to determine whether a Hindu temple once existed there. The site is one of the most violently disputed between Hindus and Muslims anywhere in the country.

Right-wing Hindu groups that support the governing Bharatiya Janata Party believe it to be the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram thousands of years ago. They claim that Muslim marauders destroyed a Hindu temple there and built a mosque in its place in the 16th century. Muslims have said the claim is unproved.

In 1992, Hindu mobs attacked the mosque, the Babri, and destroyed it, leading to countrywide communal clashes that killed 2,000 people.

Hindu groups then cordoned off the area and built a makeshift temple on the site before the country's Supreme Court banned further construction.

Today, a bench of the Allahabad High Court asked the Archaeological Survey of India, a government organization, to start excavations at Ayodhya to get to the truth in the dispute.

Meanwhile, Hindu groups last week announced a renewed campaign to press the government to allow the construction of the temple, even as the courts still contemplated the dispute. Hundreds of pillars and carved statues of Hindu gods are stacked near the disputed site ready to be quickly assembled.

On Wednesday, the court told archaeological experts to submit a report within a week of completing the excavation study. Radar may be used to assist the study, it said.

The court, however, forbade any digging in the central area where the makeshift temple stands. The excavation should not disrupt Hindu prayers now allowed at restricted times, the court said.

Another court decision is expected on Thursday, when the Supreme Court will consider whether to allow religious activities to take place around the disputed site. Such activity was banned last year by the court to avoid Hindu-Muslim clashes.

India's opposition parties, including the Congress Party, accused the governing Bharatiya Janata Party and its supporters of fomenting the Ayodhya dispute to gain advantage

ahead of crucial state assembly elections later this year. India's national election is scheduled at the end of 2004.

In India, religion and politics are inextricably tangled. Hindus dominate its 1.03 billion population, but 11 percent of Indians are Muslims. Muslims want the Ayodhya mosque resurrected at the same site.

The Bharatiya Janata became a power in Indian politics after it launched an aggressive campaign calling for revival of Hindu ideals, and made election promises to construct the Ram temple on the Ayodhya site.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the aggressive Hindu affiliate of the Bharatiya Janata, welcomed the court excavation order and said its case for construction of a temple on the site would be strengthened.

The opposition Congress Party reacted cautiously. A spokesman said a judicial verdict on the dispute ought to be respected by all.

In February of last year, a train carrying Hindu temple supporters returning from Ayodhya was set ablaze in the state of Gujarat, in India's west, killing 59 people.

The attack set off some of the worst communal riots since India's independence. Violence raged for days and persisted for more than two months, claiming almost 1,000 lives.