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In Massacre of Hindus, a Grim Omen for All India

By AMY WALDMAN
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GANDHINAGAR, India, Sept. 26 — For a decade, Nitish Acharya has volunteered at the Akshardham Cultural Complex, trying to promote peace and brotherhood with exhibits like the Hall of Harmony, which highlights the commonality among the world's religions. There was little, then, to prepare him for what he saw on Tuesday afternoon when he peered through the complex's carefully tended greenery: two attackers walking — peacefully, is how he described it — as they methodically fired semiautomatic weapons toward visitors and tossed a grenade into the center's bookshop.

More than 12 hours later, the attackers were dead. So were 37 others, including 4 police commandos. The toll would have been higher if it had not been for Mr. Acharya's quick thinking. After seeing the attackers, he called the complex's main temple via intercom and told volunteers to shut the door. Similarly, other volunteers shut the doors of an exhibition hall, safely barricading 60 people inside for the night.

But in Hall 1 the attackers launched a fusillade of grenades and bullets that left a trail of carnage. The elite National Security Guard, known as the Black Cat Commandos, entered the complex late Tuesday night; the gun and grenade battle persisted until around 6 this morning.

Mr. Acharya, a member of the Swaminarayan sect of Hinduism, which built the complex here in the Gujarat State capital, found his certainty about the order of things weakened. "Whatever has been done, why has it been done, that is the question," he said today, occasionally shaking as he spoke.

There was no easy answer, although two letters found on the attackers' bodies linked them to a group called Tareekh e Kasas, or Movement for Revenge, which was unknown to law enforcement officials. The letters — written in Urdu, which is used by Indian Muslims as well as Pakistanis — suggested that the killings were revenge against Hindus for the deaths of hundreds of Gujarat's Muslims during communal violence earlier this year.

R. B. Brahmbhatt, superintendent of police for Gandhinagar, said the letters talked about "boy children" and old people being burned in the sectarian violence. "We are ready to sacrifice our lives," he quoted the letters as saying. "This is the beginning. The World Hindu Council and Shiv Sena are ready to take revenge on Muslims. We are willing to be martyrs."

The World Hindu Council and Shiv Sena are Hindu nationalist groups.

Such sentiments, of course, did not explain how two young men who looked to be little more than teenagers had acquired some 600 rounds of ammunition and more than 20 grenades. Indian leaders quickly saw the larger hand of Pakistan at work.

But the letters offer a reminder that the Hindu-Muslim violence in the area earlier this year, which killed 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, will not easily fade from memory.

In recent months Muslim families in Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar's larger neighboring city, slowly left relief camps and returned to the Naroda Patia area, where the police say 86 people died in the violence, to rebuild burned homes. Today the area's Muslim lanes were all but deserted.

As word spread of the attack on Tuesday night, Muslims began to worry about reprisals. Whole families in some cases, only women and children in others, quickly left. "Whoever stays here may get hurt," said Ghulam Muhammad, 32, a rickshaw driver, explaining why he had sent his wife and four children away.

Ahmed Khan, 48, said: "The people talked to the police yesterday, but still we didn't trust them. We thought it best to leave."

During the earlier rioting, the police in many cases did little to protect the victims. One Hindu, Jagdish Jethabhai, 29, said the police had come to the area to suggest that the men send their families elsewhere for safety. V. S. Gohil, the police inspector in charge of Naroda Patia, confirmed today that residents had expressed skepticism.

Although some of the refugees headed for relatives' homes, about 1,000 made their way on Tuesday night to Dariyakhan Ghummat Rahat Camp, said Ataularkhan R. Pathan, a social worker there. He said the influx had almost doubled the camp's population of 1,300.

Muslim anxiety deepened today when the World Hindu Council and Shiv Sena called a nationwide strike for Thursday to protest the killings. A similar strike was called in February, the day after a Muslim mob set a train on fire at Godhra, killing 59 Hindus and sowing the seeds of retaliatory violence.

But the World Hindu Council's general secretary, Pravin Togadia, said he thought the reaction this time would be different. After the Godhra attack, he said, the state did not act. This time it did, by killing the assailants. The army has also been deployed to prevent violence.

In any case, political leaders spent today trying to direct ire toward an external enemy. The deputy prime minister, L. K. Advani, mentioned a recent United Nations speech by President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan, in which India was criticized for the violence in Gujarat. "Recently our enemy referred to Gujarat," Mr. Advani said. "It is evident they have been planning this for a while."

Foreign Minister Yaswant Sinha said the methods used in the attack were similar to those in an attack on the Indian Parliament last December that India has attributed to Pakistan-based militants.

At the temple, there was bafflement over the assault. The complex, with its palm trees and manicured lawns, lakes and an amusement park, is visited by people of all religions. But assaulted it was, as the crowded C-2 ward at Ahmedabad Civil Hospital showed. In one bed, J. S. Miora, 67, lay with a bullet wound in his hand and burns from bomb blasts on his feet.

In another, Sumitra Ben, 32, wiped away tears, remembering her two dead children, a 3-year-old and a 14-month-old. Nearby, Sunat Kaur, 5, and Basmeet Kaur, 3, cousins in matching braids, worked patiently in school notebooks, bandages wrapped around their small limbs.

What had happened? Sunat was asked. "Bomb blast," she replied evenly.

No clearer explanation would ever come from her attackers, whose bullet-riddled bodies were laid out at the cultural center today, with thin rib cages exposed, clean-shaven faces frozen. Even their victims remarked on how young they looked.