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Police stand guard outside a court in Amritsar, India, after Lawrence Bishnoi was brought in in connection with the killing of gangster Rana Kandowalia in 2022. The Canadian government says Bishnoi, one of India's most notorious gangsters, co-ordinated with Indian officials to target dissidents overseas, specifically Sikh activists living in Canada.

POLITICS

THE CRIME BOSS WHO IS THE PIVOTAL FIGURE IN INDIA-CANADA SPAT

SUDHI RANJAN SEN
AND DAN STRUMPF

As diplomatic relations fray between India and Canada over the assassination of a Sikh separatist leader, the spotlight is now turning to one of India's most notorious gangsters.

The RCMP earlier this month accused Lawrence Bishnoi of colluding with Indian government agents to kill and harass members of the Sikh diaspora in Canada. That comes in the wake of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's allegations last year that New Delhi was involved in the killing of a Canadian citizen — claims that India has strongly denied. Trudeau's government has upped the stakes in recent weeks, expelling India's top diplomat in Canada after he refused to be questioned about the case.

Bishnoi's alleged involvement highlights what Canada says is the long arm of India's criminal underworld and its capacity to carry out violence far from home. Bishnoi, in his early 30s, heads "one of the most feared terror syndicates" in South Asia, according to India's federal anti-terrorism body. His gang, described in Indian court filings, numbers around 700 and includes suspected militants and drug runners in Canada, the U.S. and the United Arab Emirates.

Trudeau's government says Bishnoi co-ordinated with Indian officials to target dissidents overseas, specifically Sikh activists living in Canada who support the creation of an ethno-religious homeland in India called Khalistan. Canada had been investigating India's government involvement in the gunning down last year of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Canadian separatist activist who was considered a terrorist by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government. New Delhi has repeatedly dismissed allegations that officials were involved in the deadly shooting in B.C. last year.

In the past, Bishnoi has been linked with Sikh militant groups, an irony considering he's now accused of targeting Canadians campaigning for Khalistan. He and his gang have had strong connections with Sikh separatist elements, some of who operate from Pakistan, court documents show. India's federal anti-terror body also alleged that Bishnoi and his associates were involved in the 2016 jailbreak of a suspected Khalistani separatist and that they attacked a police facility in 2022 in the northern Punjab state with sophisticated weapons, including rocket-propelled grenades.

Bishnoi has spent about a decade in prison in India, convicted

for several crimes stretching back to as early as 2010, when he was charged with trespassing with the intent of assault with weapons, according to court documents.

He's built a social-media presence by airing grievances with famous Punjabi singers, Bollywood actors and Indian politicians. Over the years, videos of him on YouTube and Instagram made by supporters have garnered hundreds of thousands of likes.

Terminder Singh, a lawyer who's represented Bishnoi in Punjab, declined to comment on Canada's accusations. "There has been no proper investigation into these allegations," he said. "It's difficult to explain how a man in prison is organizing hits or extorting money."

“**UNDER THIS STRONG GOVERNMENT, OUR FORCES HAVE BEEN KILLING TERRORISTS ON THEIR OWN TURF.**”

Canada has not yet released evidence connecting Indian officials to Bishnoi.

Trudeau has said his government only went public with the accusations after a lengthy behind-the-scenes effort to address the matter diplomatically was rejected by Indian officials.

In its rebuttals, India has underlined the dearth of information in the public domain. Randhir Jaiswal, a spokesman for the Ministry of External Affairs, said New Delhi also has a track record of distancing itself from Bishnoi, including asking Canada to extradite members of his gang residing in the country.

"We informed Canada about them several years ago and recently as well," Jaiswal told reporters earlier this month. "There has been no response from Canada."

Even though Bishnoi is currently jailed in the state of Gujarat, some Indian officials still believe he's capable of carrying out criminal activity. India's federal anti-terror body — the National Investigative Agency — told a trial court last year that Bishnoi is so adroit at operating from inside his cell that he hasn't felt the need to apply for bail.

Born in Dutranwali — a small town in Punjab near the

India-Pakistan border — Bishnoi grew up in a relatively prosperous family, according to Indian police officials, who asked not to be identified because they weren't authorized to discuss ongoing investigations. Court documents peg Bishnoi's first brush with the law to his time as a college student, when he shot a political rival.

Bishnoi started building his criminal syndicate in 2013, according to Indian court filings. By his early 20s, he was already named in nearly a dozen criminal cases. In 2022, Bishnoi claimed responsibility for the death of famed Punjabi singer Sidhu Moose Wala, a development that catapulted him to the front pages of Indian newspapers. The Bishnoi gang also took credit on social media for the shooting last month of the politician Baba Siddique.

One Indian police officer, who asked not to be named to discuss classified information, said Bishnoi loves his carefully cultivated image as a "patriotic gangster" and dark hero who takes to crime to right wrongs. Bishnoi is a gun-for-hire — killing, extorting and threatening for profit, the officer said.

Connections between India's political establishment and local criminal groups — including Bishnoi's — aren't unheard of. Last December, the Delhi police arrested a former Indian intelligence agent for allegedly extorting money from a businessman on behalf of Bishnoi. The agent, Vikas Yadav, is also wanted in the U.S. for trying to assassinate an American citizen active in promoting a breakaway state for Sikhs, who mostly populate Punjab in northern India.

Yadav's lawyer, RK Handoo, said the case was "false and charges baseless."

Under previous governments, high-level committees have warned about a nexus between the underworld and politicians, including co-ordinating attacks in South Asia. What's new, however, is potentially striking in countries like the U.S., Canada and Australia — wealthy Western democracies that consider India a strategic partner.

As Canada and India continue to trade barbs, Modi has refrained from publicly commenting. But during election rallies, the Indian prime minister has credited his administration with pursuing and eliminating alleged criminals in other countries. It's a topic former Indian premiers usually avoided addressing.

"Under this strong government, our forces have been killing terrorists on their own turf," Modi said at a recent political rally in the region of Jammu and Kashmir.

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