

Ex-Indian army major takes flight, kills family

By GOSIA WOZNIACKA, The Associated Press

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SELMA, Calif. (AP) — At 6:15 a.m. last Saturday, Avtar Singh dialed 911 from his home in the Central Valley farming town 200 miles north of Los Angeles. He told police he had just killed four people and was about to kill himself. Then the line disconnected.

Selma police found Singh, 47, dead in his living room. His 36-year-old wife and three-year-old son were dead in a bed in the master bedroom. His 17-year-old son lay dead in his bedroom. A third son, 15 years old, was barely alive in another room and later died. All had been shot in the head.

The burst of bloodletting that wiped out Singh's family in their modest one-story house marked the end of a nine-year evasion of authorities for a once-feared military officer from India. Accused of murdering a human rights lawyer in his homeland, Singh took flight, living briefly in Canada, then the United States, building a family and a small trucking business along the way.

The two governments eventually found out about his past. But Singh stayed one step ahead of halting efforts to return him to India to face justice. He managed to stay free despite worldwide Interpol notices that he was wanted for murder, despite his arrest by U.S. immigration authorities for being here illegally and despite his prosecution by local authorities for domestic violence.

Even so, his family's immigration problems, strained finances and fears he would face extradition to India were weighing heavily on him, an associate said.

"When you look back on it, there were tell-tale signs," said Charles Stephens, a Fresno immigration consultant who assisted Singh with the family's asylum case. "He was basically on edge, anxious."

During the last year, Singh's past caught up with him.

In 2011, he was arrested after his wife said he choked her, and police discovered Singh was a former Indian Army major who was wanted for the 1996 killing of Jalil Andrabi, a lawyer and prominent human rights advocate in the disputed Himalayan region of Indian-controlled Kashmir.

Singh was posted to Kashmir in the 1990s, at the height of protests in the region, where rebel groups were fighting Indian security forces for independence or a merger with Pakistan.

Andrabi was abducted in 1996, just before he was to leave for Geneva to address a United Nations session about human rights violations by Indian forces in Kashmir.

He was picked up by Indian troops, tortured, and killed, according to a police investigation. His body was recovered in a river — shot in the head with eyes gouged out.

Singh was charged with Andrabi's killing. The probe also accused him of involvement in six other deaths.

Despite the charges, Singh was posted by the army to another region in India. A judge directed the Indian government to confiscate Singh's passport and not issue another one, but Singh fled India for Canada in 2003.

The Singhs lived in Canada with family relatives for two years and applied for asylum, but their claim was denied, according to Singh's U.S. asylum documents provided to The Associated Press by his immigration consultant.

Canadian authorities let Indian officials know Singh was living in Canada in 2004, according to court documents obtained by Andrabi's attorney, Hafizullah Mir, and shown to the AP.

After his cover was blown, Singh and his family crossed illegally into the U.S. and settled in Fresno County, where Singh filed an asylum case for himself in 2011.

"He told me, 'My job in India was to eliminate terrorists who were against the Indian government. I was good at that, they never found the bodies when I did it,' " said Stephens, Singh's immigration consultant.

In his asylum application, Singh said he did not kill Andrabi, but knew who did. "I am being made a scapegoat," he said, adding that he would be killed if he returned to India.

Singh lived quietly in California initially, working at a truck wash and at a sandwich shop. He eventually started a trucking business— he owned five tractors and trailers — which he named Jay Truck Lines, after his third son, a U.S. citizen.

"He was so nice with everyone, with our community. And he was very good to his wife and children," said Balvir Singh Grewal, who worked as a driver for Singh. "I never saw him angry."

Community members in Fresno said Singh did not hide that he was an Indian army major — but he omitted the salient detail that he was wanted for murder in his homeland.

"We don't go anywhere. We don't have outings or a happy life. We are fearful," Singh's wife told a social worker in March in preparing for an asylum claim.

Singh, working as a truck driver in 2007, was detained by immigration agents in Iowa. Immigration and Customs Enforcement had received an anonymous letter stating Singh may

have committed fraud to obtain legal status in the United States, said ICE spokeswoman Virginia Kice.

At the time, Kice said, ICE did not know about Singh's murder charges in India. While he was placed in removal proceedings, Singh was released on a \$4,000 bond.

Two years later, India requested that Interpol issue a so-called "red notice" that Singh was wanted in India.

When Singh resurfaced in Selma in the domestic violence case in 2011, Interpol in Washington passed the message of Singh's whereabouts to Interpol in India, said agency spokeswoman LaTonya Miller.

Interpol Washington officials said the U.S. does not consider an Interpol notice alone to be a sufficient basis for the arrest and detention of a person.

So Singh bailed out of jail on the felony domestic violence charges. He pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor of false imprisonment, and was sentenced to three years of probation and a 52-week batterer's treatment program, said Sonia De La Rosa, spokeswoman for the Fresno County District Attorney's Office.

In March 2011, immigration agents in Fresno were notified about the Interpol notice.

But, because Avtar and Singh are common names in India, ICE officials said, the agency tried contacting India through Interpol to obtain fingerprints and crime reports that would corroborate that the Singh residing in Fresno was the same person being sought for the Kashmir murder.

The Indian government did not respond to repeated inquiries, said Kice of ICE.

"Given the unresolved issues surrounding Singh's identity and possible role in a serious human rights crime, last year ICE attorneys in San Francisco moved to administratively close his removal proceedings — putting the deportation process on hold — until the outstanding evidence could be obtained," she said.

Indian officials have not responded to repeated requests from the AP about why they never sought to extradite Singh.

Investigators are still trying to determine what pushed Singh to kill his family and himself.

Grewal, Singh's truck driver, said he spoke with Singh by phone about 30 minutes before he shot his wife and kids. "He told me to pick up a load in Iowa. He was very nice. I don't know what happened, I was completely surprised."

Associated Press writer Aijaz Hussain in Srinagar, India, contributed to this report.

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