

## [Transcript] The Daily / Canada Confronts India Over Alleged Assassination

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From the New York Times, I'm Sabrina Tavernisi,  
and this is The Daily.  
The relationship between two democratic allies  
fell to its lowest point in history this week,  
after Canada accused India of being involved  
in the assassination of a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil.  
Today, my colleague, South Asia bureau chief,  
Mujib Mashaal, on this stunning allegation,  
and on what India's reaction tells us  
about the era of its leader, Narendra Modi.  
It's Thursday, September 21st.  
So, Mujib, tell me about the accusations  
that Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made on Monday.  
Prime Minister Trudeau got on the floor of the parliament  
Monday afternoon.  
Mr. Speaker, today I'm rising to inform the House  
of an extremely serious matter.  
And he said he had something very serious to share.  
Over the past number of weeks, Canadian security agencies  
have been actively pursuing credible allegations  
of a potential link between agents of the government of India  
and the killing of a Canadian citizen.  
That his government had information linking agents  
of the Indian government with a killing of a Canadian citizen  
on Canadian soil.  
And he named the individual...  
Hardeep Singh Nijjar.  
Hardeep Singh Nijjar.  
It is contrary to the fundamental rules  
by which free, open, and democratic societies  
conduct themselves.  
And Trudeau was very visibly incensed,  
and he made clear that this was an issue  
the Canadian government was taking very, very seriously,

that it was a matter of a breach of Canada's sovereignty.  
In the strongest possible terms,  
I continue to urge the government of India  
to cooperate with Canada to get to the bottom of this matter.  
And this was a hugely explosive moment  
because here was the prime minister of Canada  
leveling a huge accusation against one of its allies.  
Right, the leader of one democracy  
accusing another democracy of a killing like this,  
it just doesn't happen.  
Usually if a state wants to get someone in another democracy,  
they go through legal channels.  
They ask that state to extradite the person.  
They don't just go into another democracy's territory  
and kill someone,  
because that would just be incredibly destabilizing  
for the world.  
It's rare.  
It's very rare, and it's associated with governments  
that are not seen as democratic.  
And it has definitely not been associated with India  
and with India's security agencies.  
So the fact that the accusation came  
from the highest level of the Canadian government,  
that this was the prime minister of Canada  
putting his own face on this accusation  
and making the accusation from the floor of the parliament  
made clear how big of a deal this is  
and how much is at stake in the relationship  
between these two countries.  
So what do we know about what Trudeau is alleging here?  
I mean, what details do we have about this killing?  
So the details are very, very limited.  
What we know is that in June, Mr. Najjar was in the parking lot  
of this temple he was associated with,  
and two masked gunmen came up to him and shot him,  
and that the masked gunmen then got away in a vehicle.  
And Mr. Najjar was dead.  
Obviously it caused a shock in his community  
and there were reactions to his murder.  
But whether it was a political killing  
or anything else remained a mystery at the time.  
So Trudeau's speech this week was the first time  
we heard a formal allegation.

And what do we know about this man that Trudeau says the Indian government helped kill? We know that he was 45 years old that he had moved from the Indian state of Punjab to Canada in 1990s. And that at some point during his time in Canada after he settled there, he worked as a plumber that he was very heavily involved in his local Sikh community. And that in 2020 he actually became the head of a local Sikh temple in Surrey in British Columbia. And so it was clear that he had some stature in his community there and that he was very involved in advocacy. But that advocacy that he was involved, the Indian government actually sees that as terrorism. Oh, wow. Okay, so talk to me about that. So the cause that Mr. Najjar was advocating for is called Khalistan, which is basically the creation of a country, an independent country, for the Sikhs from what is the Indian state of Punjab. And this cause has been around for decades. Actually, it goes back to the moment that India was partitioned when the British colonial rule ended. India was divided into a nation for the Muslims, which became Pakistan, and the Sikhs in Punjab, they stood up and sections of the Sikhs stood up and said, we want similarly another country along religious lines for ourselves called Khalistan. And the Sikhs are a religious minority in India, but in this one state in Punjab, they're a majority. So they wanted to turn Punjab into an independent nation called Khalistan. And that wasn't something that they got at the time. But this cause remained as an insurgency, and it climaxed in a very violent period in the 1980s in Punjab. And what happened in the 1980s? So the advocates of Khalistan grew bolder in the 1980s. A group of armed Khalistani militants moved into the Golden Temple, which is the holiest site of Sikhism in Punjab. And they barricaded themselves in there. And Indira Gandhi, who was a prime minister, she was known as the Iron Lady of India. And for Mrs. Gandhi's government, that was an affront that she wanted to crush. And so she's then in the commandos to clear them from the temple. From a distance, an uneasy calm appeared to have settled over the Golden Temple,

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but close up the effects of the 10-day siege between Sikh extremists and soldiers were apparent. But that resulted in hundreds of people dead inside the temple. Two corpses had to be retrieved from the sacred lake, which was now be drained and refilled. And that really incensed a lot of the wider Sikh population. The feeling was that Mrs. Gandhi had used disproportionate violence in how she cracked down on that. And that her government had moved against the wider Sikh population rather than this small extreme minority that wanted independent country. And as she was on her way one morning, leaving her residence to her office to seek bodyguards, basically stepped in and shot her dead. As the country started 12 official days of mourning, violence mixed with grief. And that unleashed a period of widespread indiscriminate violence against Sikhs in India. Scores of cars belonging to Sikhs were burned. Most taxi drivers in Delhi are Sikhs, proving easy targets for angered Hindus. And the ruling party at the time, the Congress party was complicit in this because they made it clear that this was revenge for the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi. And it was pogroms basically in Sikh neighborhoods. All the men in the houses were dragged out, knifed and set on fire. Those who resisted were hacked to pieces. The army is out in force trying to keep what peace they can in a city and country, sliding perilously close to civil war. And that period of the 80s has remained a wound that the community carries. So there's this explosive period of violence against ordinary Sikhs, people who had nothing to do with the political demands of the movement. What happens with the movement after that? Well, the movement is actually largely crushed in India and in Punjab in particular. But what we see in that period also is a increased migration out of India, because on the one hand, India's economy was struggling at that time. So there's a lot of economic migration. But a lot of the Sikhs from Punjab leave with this wound that the Indian state was prejudiced against them. So a large number of Sikhs start settling in countries like Australia, the U.S., the U.K., but particularly in Canada, because the Canadians had changed their immigration laws, had become much more open, I think, since the late 60s and 70s. So a large number of Sikhs settle in Canada to a point that Canada is the second place after India with the largest Sikh population in the world. So what happened was that although this cause of separatism was squashed in India, the sentiment remained alive in these diasporas among parts of the Sikh community that settled there.

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So Najjar is an example of this.

He moved to Canada in the 1990s.

He was a leader in the Sikh community and supported the creation of an independent state.

So what was he actually doing to further that?

So one of the main things that he was involved in was this idea of a referendum for Palestine.

So this is basically a vote on Canadian soil for the creation of a nation out of a piece of India.

So it has no bearing on the ground in India.

But it was basically a tactic to try to keep as many Sikhs interested in this idea of an independent nation as possible.

To get them to actually to a ballot box to vote for this imagined nation.

And so when the Canadians are seeing his activities,

they see a man running around with pamphlets and organizing and mobilizing voters.

Most of it sort of feels under protected speech in Canada.

Right. He's just doing vote activity.

He's just doing vote activity, yes, for an idea that is separatism, but it's an idea.

Right. But what the Indians see is not just a nonviolent protest movement for this cause.

They see a movement that is tied to a lot of violence.

In fact, in the 1980s, it was members of this movement that blew up an air India flight that had taken off from Canada and was flying to London midair and causing the deaths of more than 300 people.

And people like Mr. Nadjar in more recent years,

they, the Indian government have accused him of having roles in violence and bombings and in killings in India.

The Indian officials say that we've expressed this to Canadians repeatedly to a point that a couple of years ago, the Indians declared him a terrorist and that they had wanted his extradition from the Canadian government.

So it was two different narratives around the same man.

So I guess it kind of makes sense why Trudeau would have suspected India of killing Nadjar, but did Trudeau offer any proof that it actually was India?

Like when he gave his announcement in parliament, what evidence did he show?

So that's where the problem is. He didn't offer any details.

There's been no proof or evidence that's been offered publicly.

And India has unequivocally denied this.

They said, this is not what we do.

But they're also saying that there are terrorists, that there are terror sympathizers on Canadian grounds, and the Canadian government is not taking any action.

So this has all caused this diplomatic row now where the Canadians expelled a senior Indian diplomat and reaction the Indians expelled a senior Canadian diplomat.

And trade ties between the two countries have been paused.

Their travel advisories flying left and right

and the relationship between these two countries is the lowest it's ever been.

We'll be right back.

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Find your future at [emerson.com](https://emerson.com/careers) slash careers.

I'm Kevin Rus, and I'm Casey Newton.

We're technology reporters and the hosts of Hard Fork, a show from the New York Times.

A hard fork is a programming term for when you're building something, but it gets really screwed up.

So you take the entire thing, break it, and start over.

And that's a little bit what it feels like right now in the tech industry.

Like these companies that you and I have been writing about for the past decade, they're all kind of struggling to stay relevant.

Yeah, I mean, a lot of the energy and money in Silicon Valley is shifting to totally new ideas, crypto, the metaverse, AI.

It feels like a real turning point.

And all this is happening so fast.

Some of it's so strange.

I just feel like I'm texting you constantly.

Like, what is this story?

Explain this to me.

And so we're going to talk about these stories.

We're going to bring in other journalists, newsmakers, whoever else is involved in building this future to explain to us what's changing and why it all matters.

Hard fork from the New York Times.

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So, Mujib, you described India's response to Trudeau's allegation, which was essentially they're denying it.

They're saying, absolutely, this was not us.

But at the same time, they're saying Canada is sheltering terrorists.

So what does that dual response reveal about India in this moment?

In many ways, it's a reflection of the domestic politics in this country.

Prime Minister Modi has projected this image of a strongman protector of the country.

And to do that, you usually need a threat that you're protecting the country against.

And that's been very beneficial to him.

In 2019, when he was struggling politically,

what helped him gain a sweeping victory

was this bombing that happened in Kashmir and it was tied to Pakistan.

And he created a whole nationalist movement against that and he won sweepingly.

So his solid position at the top has as much dependent on protecting against threats.

And this idea of Khalistan fits nicely in that as well.

We've seen in the past two, three years, it's actually come very handy

that in the biggest political challenge Mr. Modi faced in his 10 years in power was this farmer's protest.

A majority of those farmers were Sikhs from Punjab.

They were just average citizens of India protesting against a farm bill that they didn't agree with.

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But what Mr. Modi's officials did was often they labeled those farmers as Khalistanis, essentially as separatist terrorists.

So it left the sense that sometimes the government wants to stoke the extent of this threat because it feeds into the political need of a threat to protect against.

And now as this episode plays up, there's an election coming up in a few months where Mr. Modi is seeking a third term and it increasingly appears that in the election season, this will be a conversation as well.

But what you know is accusing Modi's government of is not using rhetoric to excite his base. He's accusing Modi's government of murder, of killing a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil. Absolutely.

But the accusation of this violence doesn't actually put off Modi's supporters in how it plays out in the domestic politics here.

And why is that?

Because the Hindu nationalist vision that has brought Modi to power, in that vision there is this idea that for a long time because of Muslim invasions, because of the British colonial rule, Hindus were emasculated in this country. Now that they've had a chance to reshape this country, that needs to be a strong vision where violence actually does have a role.

That you do use violence to pursue your goals and to show strength.

Modi embodies that personally in how he projects that strength.

But using violence as a tool for power is very clearly vocalized in that vision.

That this accusation that Modi's government may have done this, if anything, would help politically rather than hurt.

So you're saying that Modi isn't actually facing any repercussions domestically because the accusation of violence itself doesn't hurt Modi.

If one was to read the reaction over the past couple of days in the domestic debate here, that is exactly the point you'd be left with, that that violence doesn't hurt him, that violence further cements his image of a strong man who would use any tool to protect this country.

But what about the response outside of India?

I mean, what about India's Western allies say?

Isn't there a risk that this could cause some response on their part, sanctions, punishment of some sort?

Well, actually, the response has been pretty muted.

Even among these countries known as the Five Eyes, essentially partners of Canada that Canada shares intelligence with, the United States, Australia, the UK, when we thought that at least the Canadians would have shared the evidence they have with those countries and would see a strong reaction, their reaction has been muted as well.

They've been saying we are concerned, but we'll see where the investigations lead.

They're not coming out as unequivocally as Canada would have hoped.

And a large part of that reason is from the US to the UK to France and Germany, everybody's trying to court India.

In this moment of huge tensions with China, the West has been looking to India as sort of a counterbalance.



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And that need is so massive that a lot of these Western powers have been looking away from some of the things that India has been doing.

So that has created the sense of confidence for India that we are so indispensable, not just because of that counterbalance to China, but also because of a rise as a large economy that we can get away with a lot.

That a lot of things that would ruffle feathers in the past might not do so anymore.

And how muted the response of some of these Canadian allies have been over the past couple of days only plays into that Indian confidence more.

I mean, listening to you talk about this, it also sounds like Canada's Prime Minister Trudeau is kind of out on his own here.

No one's coming out and supporting him.

He's alone.

Absolutely.

And this will test how far Prime Minister Trudeau pushes it because he's put his reputation on the line and his convincing powers of how much he can rally his allies will be tested here because the Indian pushback has been very obvious.

There hasn't been a sign that the Indian government wants to cooperate in the face of such a major accusation.

So now that Prime Minister Trudeau has gone all out with it, it is a test of what can he really achieve with it.

So stepping back here, investigations like this, of course, can take years, and we may never know the answer to whether India was behind the killing.

But in some ways, Modi may have just learned that in effect, he could get away with it, that the wrath of what the Western allies would not come crashing down on him because of where India is in the world right now.

It's economic promise.

It's counterbalance to China.

These things in some ways give it a kind of get out of jail free card.

Exactly, exactly.

And even this moment of pushing back against Canada's accusation is almost being seen in an India by the Indian government as a way of proving your strength at the world stage right now.

What can we do about it?

That we are positioned so strongly with ties to the powers that we can get away with anything.

This may be overcoming an accusation, or it may be actually a hand in committing a murder.

We don't know which one it is, but even overcoming this Canadian accusation is being used as a point of showing strength.

Mojib, thank you.

Thank you.

On Thursday, the conflict between India and Canada escalated, with India announcing that it was suspending visa applications for Canadian nationals.

A spokesman for the Indian Foreign Ministry cited safety threats to Indian consulates in Canada as the reason for the move.

We'll be right back.

Here's what else you should know today.



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The fix is in.

There's one investigation protecting President Biden.

There's another one attacking President Trump.

Justice Department's got both sides of the equation covered.

During a heated and partisan hearing in Congress on Wednesday,

House Republicans pushed Attorney General Merrick Garland to explain what they see as the unfair ways in which his office has handled the federal prosecutions of former President Trump and President Biden's son, Hunter Biden.

I guess I'm just wondering, Mr. Attorney General,

has anyone at the department told President Biden to knock it off with Hunter?

Our job in the Justice Department is to pursue our cases without reference to what's happening in the outside world.

Just yes or no, have you done that?

That is what we do.

So it's a no?

No one that I know of has spoken to the White House about the Hunter Biden case.

Garland, who was repeatedly interrupted by Republicans as he testified,

told them that his office has never interfered in the Hunter Biden investigation

and has followed the letter of the law in its prosecution of former President Trump.

I am not the president's lawyer.

I will add, I am not Congress's prosecutor.

The Justice Department works for the American people.

Our job is to follow the facts and the law, and that is what we do.

And with COVID infections on the rise, the Biden administration will spend \$600 million to revive a program that offers free COVID tests through the mail.

Starting on Monday of next week, every American household can begin requesting up to four tests at covidtests.gov.

Today's episode was produced by Asda Tatarvedi, Rob Zipko, Eric Kropke, and Will Read.

It was edited by Lisa Chow and MJ Davis Lin.

Contains original music by Alicia Beytu and Will Read, and was engineered by Chris Wood.

Our theme music is by Jim Brunberg and Ben Lansverk of Wunderley.

That's it for the Daily. I'm Sabrina Taverni-Sie. See you tomorrow.