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Wife, 3 kids hadn't seen him for a year until police showed him on TV as HuJI arrest

PALLAVI SINGH , PALLAVI SINGH : Lilaun (Muzaffarnagar), May 24, Sun May 25 2008, 00:32 hrs



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Under a crumbling facade in fading green and white paint, bearing remnants of Persian architecture, more than a dozen men, old and young, sit huddled on charpoys, blocking way to bare-brick rooms inside. It's here in one of the rooms with uncleared debris of bird nests falling from the ceilings that Rehmati and Mehrunnisa, two women have been taking turns to cry and cook food for a family of eleven.

Rehmati's son and Mehrunnisa's husband is 31-year-old Mohammad Iqbal, alias Abdur Rehman, who they saw on TV on Thursday night after his arrest by the Delhi Police in the capital.

Neither of the two women had seen him for almost a year and villagers remember him as a "calm" cleric who once left the local mosque after it didn't give him a raise and then went missing for months until they heard about his arrest.

The police story is far removed: they said he was a militant of the Harkat-ul-Jehadi-Islami (HuJI), he was carrying explosives, he knew about the Jaipur blasts last fortnight and was also wanted for last year's blasts in Varanasi, Gorakhpur and the attack on board the

Samjhauta Express.

Rehman was brought to his native village Lilaun in UP's Muzaffarnagar district a day later but his relatives say they were not allowed to meet him. Even Mehrunnisa, who was brought by the police to Lilaun from her parents' home in Bilaspur after almost a year with her three children Jainab (7), Fatima (5) and Ahmed (1) said she couldn't meet him: "I only caught a glimpse of him in the police van. He has grown pale," she says.

Mehrunnisa says that before her husband disappeared, he used to regularly send money to the family, make calls and come visiting every fortnight. "But after Friday prayers one day last year, we never heard from him," she adds.

Rehman neither called nor wrote letters, not even to his wife during the last one year, when she went to her parents' with their three children, only to be brought back in the wake of his arrest later week.

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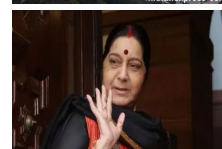
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year ago "out of fear" after local police interrogated him on the stay of two people at the mosque where he was serving as head cleric. "He speaks less and doesn't like to get involved in controversies. After the police began interrogations, he went traceless. He must have done it out of fear. We didn't hear from him for the next 8-9 months in any way. We did not know his whereabouts," says cousin Mohammad Younus, adding he might have been in Delhi. "All the while he was away, police came visiting us to interrogate on his whereabouts but we were clueless."

People at the two mosques — Takiyawali Masjid and Masjid Bhatiyaran in Shyamali in Muzaffarnagar — who remember Iqbal as a "gentle and calm" cleric are equally clueless. "While he was at the mosque, he never was engaged in any controversies. He spent most of his time in the mosque and mostly kept to himself. He was quite shy natured," says Raees Ahmad Siddiqui, manager of Takiyawali Masjid in Shyamali in Muzaffarnagar where Rehman served as head cleric from 2001 to 2002 says.

Siddiqui says Rehman quit the mosque in December 2002 after he declined to raise his monthly salary from Rs 1500 to Rs 2500. "He had just gotten married then and said his responsibilities had increased. I declined to give a raise and he quit. After that, I saw him a couple of times on his bicycle long ago. His arrest comes as a shock to me," he adds.

After Thursday's arrest, Rehman's 75-year-old father Asra is in Delhi to consult lawyers. Police in Shyamali admit Rehman has no criminal record. "We checked all the records but there is not a single case or complaint against him," said Brajpal Singh, Station House Officer of Shyamali Police Station.

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