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The US' home grown terror

Bilal Randeree
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As Faisal Shahzad, a Pakistan-born American, grabbed international headlines last week for an alleged terrorism attempt in New York's Times Square, other suspected terrorists received much less media coverage as they appeared before a judge in Detroit.

The judge ruled that all nine white, American-born members of the Hutaree Christian militia group, charged with conspiracy to commit sedition and attempted use of weapons of mass destruction, should be released on bail while awaiting trial.

Federal authorities charged that the militia intended to kill a police officer and then detonate improvised explosive devices at the officer's funeral in the hope of slaying scores of police officers in attendance and starting a "war" against the government.

Growing right wing

A website for the group shows video footage of "Christian warriors" engaged in military style training exercises in preparation to defend themselves "upon the arrival of the Antichrist".

Last year, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued a warning to law enforcement officials about a rise in "right wing extremist activity," saying that the economic recession, the election of the US' first black president and the return of a few disgruntled war veterans could swell the ranks of white power militias.

But, the report defines "right wing extremism in the United States" as including not just racist or hate groups, but also those that reject federal authority in favour of state or local authority.

"It may include groups and individuals that are dedicated to a single issue, such as opposition to abortion or immigration," the report warned.

The Southeast Michigan Volunteer Militia (SMVM), the largest and most visible of the state's many small private armies.

The Anti-Defamation League, a civil rights watchdog, says that the group has as many as 6,000 members and even more adherents in one of the few countries that permits independent militias.

And according to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a US non-profit civil rights organisation, Michigan is second only to Texas in terms of its number of volunteer militia members.

Brothers-in-arms

While experts are divided over how big a threat these groups pose, they agree that they are very well armed.

The Hutaree are considered brothers-in-arms by the SMVM and other US militias and two of the arrested Hutaree members were trained by the SMVM.



The right to possess firearms is at the heart of the militia movement [GETTY

But the militia movement has no single national leader and contains wildly divergent strains of thought, including white supremacy and neo-Nazism, Millenarianism, a belief that major social transformation is imminent, and Christian Identity, a pro-white version of Christianity.

They see the possession of firearms as not only a right protected by the second amendment of the US constitution but as a patriotic duty and a symbol of a citizen's equal standing with the government.

At the heart of the movement is a fierce allegiance to the US constitution and a belief that its rights and freedoms are threatened by the government.

The SPLC says that signs of growing radicalisation are everywhere.

Armed men have attended speeches given by Barack Obama, the US president, holding signs stating that the "tree of liberty" needs to be "watered" with "the blood of tyrants".

In February, a computer engineer angry with the government crashed a small aircraft into the federal revenue services building in Texas, saying that he hoped his act would help make "American zombies wake up and revolt".

Radicalising veterans

The 15th anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, was also the anniversary of the first shots being fired in the American Revolution and the deadly conclusion to the 1993 siege at Waco.

Timothy McVeigh, the man convicted of the Oklahoma City bombing, is known to have associated with militias in Michigan in the 1990s after serving with the US military during the Gulf war.

The DHS report suggested that right wing extremists are attempting to "recruit and radicalise returning veterans in order to exploit their skills and knowledge derived from military training and combat".

It also cited a prominent civil rights organisation which reported that "large numbers of potentially violent neo-Nazis, skinheads, and other white supremacists" are learning the art of warfare in the US armed forces.

'At war'

April 19 also saw a "second amendment march" in Washington DC where Larry Pratt, the director of Gun Owners of America (GOA), a gun rights lobbying organisation, told those gathered: "We're in a war. The other side knows they're at war, because they started it. They're coming for our freedom, for our money, for our kids, for our property."

The SPLC reported one poll which showed that 61 per cent of Americans believe the country is in decline, while only a quarter think that the government can be trusted.

It also reported that the number of hate groups in the US rose by 54 per cent between 2000 and 2008.

But for the SPLC it is the anti-government patriot movement that poses the greatest threat.

For the patriot movement, which sometimes associates with racially based hate groups, the federal government is the primary enemy.

According to the SPLC, 363 new patriot groups appeared in 2009, with the total number rising from 149 groups to 512 - a 244 per cent jump.

This rise was driven largely by an angry backlash against non-white immigration, the economic meltdown and the installation of an African-American president.

Since Obama took power, right wing extremists have murdered six law enforcement officers and racist skinheads have been arrested in alleged plots to assassinate the president.

One man was charged with murdering two black people and planning to kill as many Jews as possible on the day after Obama's inauguration.

But for now, the arrested members of the Hutaree militia remain behind bars after an appeals court granted a temporary stay of Judge Victoria Roberts' decision to release them on bail.