

Homegrown Islamists may be trying to link up with ISIS: Bangladesh

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Dhaka: Bangladesh today said there was no direct involvement of the ISIS in the recent attacks, including on Hindus and others minorities, but acknowledged that homegrown Islamist outfits may be trying to establish links with the dreaded terror group through the social media.

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said Islamists appeared to have set "soft targets" that included Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and even Muslims to grab global attention by staging major terror attacks in the country.

"I don't admit Hindus are their target alone as assault on the Sholakia Eid congregation three days ago and their past attacks on Shiite mosques and rallies indicate their motive," he told PTI in an interview.

"You can see a change in the pattern of their attacks also, initially they staged a series of small attacks on individuals and now they are staging bigger attacks targeting foreigners, policemen and ordinary Muslims," he said.

Asked if Bangladesh has revised its stance on possible ISIS link to the two recent Islamist attacks in the country, Khan said, "Our initial investigation suggests both the attacks were carried out by homegrown Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB)."

Bangladesh authorities have repeatedly blamed the outlawed JMB for the recent attacks on secular writers and minorities.

"But it appears that they (terrorists) are trying to establish links with IS through the social media...however, none of them came from Syria or any other country to stage the attacks," Khan said.

Law minister Anusul Huq also said that no legal evidence was found so far suggesting IS involvement in the attacks in Bangladesh.

"However, the terrorist may have an access to the IS media outlet to lodge the claims of their acts in the name of the Syria-based terrorist outfit," BSS news agency quoted Huq as saying.

Khan said extra security was provided when the militants carried out clandestine attacks on some Hindu priests but "soon we saw they are carrying out attacks on Buddhists, Christians and even Muslims as well".

"Islamist attacks have clearly appeared as a global phenomenon and everywhere they are setting soft targets to grab the world attention...they are targeting Buddhists, Christians and even Muslims," the minister said.

He said law enforcement agencies were asked to keep an extra vigil for the security of Hindus in Bangladesh which is the largest minority community in Muslim-majority Bangladesh.

The comments by the two ministers indicate a slight shift in the government's stance about the ISIS claims of staging a series of isolated attacks on liberal and secular writers and activists, religious minority people, moderate Sufi leaders and Shias in recent years.

Asked what measures Bangladesh has taken to assure the international community after the July 1 Holey Artisan Bakery attack in which 22 people, including 17 foreigners were killed, Khan said law enforcement agencies have

intensified their vigil for the security of the foreigners and foreign missions.

"But we are preparing to launch a massive social campaign involving religious scholars and imams to disseminate the real Islamic spirit that denounces terrorism and extremism in the name of religion," he said.

The minister said Bangladesh currently has agreements with some 15 countries for sharing information on terrorism or militancy while "we now planned to expand the network as it appeared as a global problem with many countries becoming its victim".

"Our law enforcement and intelligence agencies are competent enough, but they need to share and exchange information with other countries as well to combat the terrorists," he said.Â

As part of immediate steps, Khan said, his ministry today issued an order asking police to prepare a list of missing youths across the country as perpetrators of the last weekâ€™s Gulshan attack had gone missing for months and reappeared only to stage the carnage.

"Today I have sent a letter to the IGP (inspector general of police) asking him to instruct all police stations across the country to prepare a list of missing youths in their respective areas," he said.

Asked for comments about media reports suggesting as many as 150 youths remained missing, he called the report "speculative".

On the other hand, he said several youths were found to have returned home while some of the missing cases were not found to have no link to terrorism.

"Once the police stations compile their reports, we will have an idea about the number of missing youths, which will be required for our anti-terrorism security campaign," Khan said.

He said police would seek help of people in neighbourhoods in gathering information about the background of the missing youths and talk to their guardians as well.

Education minister Nurul Islam Nahid earlier said directives were issued asking schools to report to police if any of their student remained absent for 10 days due to unknown reasons.

Most of the youths, who carried out the Dhaka cafÃ© massacre had been missing for six months or more and their families came to know about them only after they were killed in army-led operation on July 2.

- PTI