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Tracing the gunmen

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Sleepy village baffled by link to captured  
terrorist

A sleepy village in Pakistan has found itself at the centre of the Mumbai terror plot, leaving locals bewildered.

Faridkot, a settlement in the south of the Punjab province, has been overrun by Pakistani intelligence agents and police for the past three days after it was reported by Indian officials that the lone gunman captured alive in Mumbai came from a place called Faridkot.

Agents from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) were still questioning locals yesterday.

"All the agencies have been here and the (police) special branch," said village elder Mehboob Khan Daha. "We have become very worried. What's this all about?"

A dusty backwater, the inhabitants are peasant farmers who own small parcels of land and are poorly educated. Water buffalo and goats roam the dirt tracks of the village.

Men sit around gossiping on traditional woven rope beds, placed out in the open, wearing the usual baggy shalwar kameez pyjama suits, some with turbans. Roughly built small brick homes and little mud huts are dotted around the village, which has a population of about 3,000. It is 34 miles east from the nearest large city, Multan.

"There are no jihadis here," said Ijaz Ahmed, 41. "I can think of maybe 10 or 20 people here who have even been as far as Multan."

The Faridkot link is a key plank of India's accusations against Pakistan. The captured gunman, variously named as Ajmal Amir Kamal, Azam Amir Kasav or Azam Ameer Qasab, is said to come from Faridkot, which is described as being near Multan. He is said to speak fluent English and a clear photograph of him shows a young man in western clothes. Shown a picture of the alleged militant, Daha said: "That's a smart-looking boy. We don't have that sort around here."

In Faridkot, no one appeared to be able to speak much English; most could only converse in a dialect of the provincial language. None of the villagers recognised the face in the photograph.

They said the intelligence agents wanted to know if there was any presence of the radical Deobandi or Al-Hadith religious movements in the village, to which they were told "no". The agents mentioned five names, villagers said, including Ajmal, Amir, Kamal and Azam, all common names in Pakistan. There were five Ajmals in the village, all present except one who is living in provincial capital Lahore, and none fitted the description of the militant. The Azam in the village is a 75-year-old retired railway worker.

One of the Ajmals, a man who thought he was about 30, has worked in a nearby tea factory for the past 12 years, he said. The police and intelligence agencies have been asking his whereabouts.

"All I ever do is go to work, which is about 3km away. I have never been beyond Kanewal (the closest town)," said Muhammad Ajmal. "I'm uneducated."

Faridkot lies in a part of Punjab known for extremist activity but the village itself did not show any signs of being a hotbed of militancy. Written on a board at the entrance to the village mosque, it is declared that members of the hardline Tablighi Jamaat "are not permitted".

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