

Media accused of racism in coverage of raid

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The news media's daily coverage of a raid at the B.C. legislature and the suspension of a Victoria police officer smacks of racism, say leaders in the Indo-Canadian community.

Fired legislative assistant David Basi, suspended ministerial assistant Bob Virk and suspended Const. Ravinder Dosanjh, all Indo-Canadians, are linked to a drugs and commercial crime probe and potential breach of trust case, according to police. No charges have been laid.

"If he was a white guy you wouldn't have his story in the paper every day," Sarabjit S. Nagra, president of the Sikh Temple in Victoria, said Monday. At a press conference in Victoria to defend "the honour of the Indo-Canadian community" the temple leader described the breadth and concentration of the coverage as racially motivated. He did not provide specific examples.

"In David Basi's case he has been linked to every political conspiracy except the assassination of John F. Kennedy," said Nagra.

Basi became the central figure in this story of organized crime, drug smuggling and possible police corruption after his office was one of two searched during a raid Dec. 28 at the legislature. His home was also searched.

Basi, a ministerial aide to Finance Minister Gary Collins, was fired.

Basi has maintained his innocence in statements through his lawyer. As a ministerial assistant, he helped arrange the house's legislative schedule.

But as a political organizer, he is believed to have held considerable sway, leading a group of active young federal Liberals referred to by insiders as "Basi's Boys." That term has now spilled into news reports.

According to Nagra the information has been exaggerated. Basi is prominent in the Indo-Canadian community, but by no means the most influential: "He was not the king of any riding and we're not his boys."

Pressed in a media scrum about who is most influential politically in the Indo-Canadian community, Nagra said at one point he might "put a brown face in every (riding)."

Nagra said with the exception of race there are no links between Basi, Virk and Dosanjh.

However, Victoria Police Chief Paul Battershill has said Const. Dosanjh's suspension is linked to the searches at the legislature and to the drug investigation.

Jag Dhanowa, multicultural chairman for the Federal Liberal Party of B.C., maintained the media reports using unnamed sources and citing "political losers" are "being used to smear the entire Indo-Canadian community."

The Indo-Canadian community's political zeal and shared real estate holdings are nothing new, he said.

However, rather than being viewed as cultural traits they are being scrutinized for criminal intent or wrongdoing, said the leaders.

Many leaders in the Indo-Canadian community Monday called for the release of the search warrants used to conduct the raid on the legislature.

Nagra suspects that will "deflate a lot of the overblown speculation."

During the press conference's twists and turns Monday, Dhanowa switched from allegations of racism to criticizing the political organizing efforts of Bob Russell, seeking the Liberal nomination in Saanich-Gulf Islands, and Michael Rodger, seeking the Liberal nomination in Esquimalt-Juan de Fuca.

With that, Dhanowa announced he is considering entering the Saanich-Gulf Islands race.

Longtime Liberal Kit Spence was one of those named in Dhanowa's speech. Spence, a former Saanich-Gulf Islands constituency president and now Rodger's campaign manager, has been an outspoken critic of mass sign-ups and Basi's role in backroom organizing.

But that does not amount to an attack on the entire Indo-Canadian community, he said.

What was clear Monday was the stress that has been placed on Basi and Virk.

"It is not inconceivable that the extreme stress they are under now could literally kill them or at least shorten their lives," said Dhanowa. "He's doing very poorly," said Michael **Geoghegan**, "He said, "I wish I'd have a heart attack and die."

Geoghegan, a high profile government and media relations consultant, organized the press conference.

-- with files from Judith Lavoie