

Terror funding: 4 top separatists under NIA lens

RAJNISH SHARMA
NEW DELHI, AUG. 19

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) has started tightening the noose around at least four top hardline separatist leaders in connection with a case of terror funding in the Valley after investigations led to the arrest of Srinagar-based businessman Zahoor Ahmad Watali.

Sources in the investigating agency claimed that interrogation and subsequent follow-up action against Watali, who was arrested by NIA on Thursday, provided some important leads over funding separatists using the hawala network.

Sources in central intelligence agencies, working in co-ordination with the NIA in the terror funding case, refused to divulge the identity of these separatist leaders and said investigations into the case were at a critical stage and naming the separatists at this stage could hamper the investigations.

The home ministry has already given a clear directive to the NIA and other central intelligence agencies to launch a major offensive against funding to terror outfits and separatist leaders in the Valley in a bid to contain violence in the region.

Sources said Watali had been facilitating transfer

of funds to terror groups and separatists in the Valley for anti-national activities, using the hawala network through some Gulf countries, and a detailed probe had been launched earlier in the matter.

During the custodial interrogation, Watali who is on remand with the NIA named some prominent Hurriyat leaders whom he was routing the funds through the hawala channels.

Now, a major investigation is being carried out as these Hurriyat leaders had been under the scanner already. Apart from separatists, Watali also had links with some political leaders in the Valley. He had been receiving funds from some Pakistan-based operatives, using the Gulf route, and this in turn, was being forwarded to separatists and terror groups. "Watali is a major catch for the agencies as far as terror funding operations in the Valley are concerned," a senior intelligence official said.

The NIA earlier said that Watali was arrested after raids at different locations in the Valley, including Baramulla, Handwara, Kupwara and Srinagar. The agency also claimed recovery of a large amount of incriminating material during these searches "linked to flow of funds into the Valley from undisclosed foreign sources".