

Maharashtra ATS seizes 10 pistols from home of key terror accused

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THE MAHARASHTRA Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) seized “around 10 pistols” Sunday from the residence of Vaibhav Raut, a member of the Hindu Govansh Raksha Samiti who was among the three arrested two days ago in a crackdown against radical Hindu groups last week.

“Around 10 pistols were seized from his residence. The latest seizure was based on the interrogation of the three accused. From their make, it looks like these pistols were procured from Uttar Pradesh. However, we are probing if they were procured or manufactured by the group,” said a senior official.



Accused Vaibhav Raut at a Mumbai court, Friday. *Kevin DSouza*

The ATS is now investigating if the three arrested, and their associates, were operating a weapons manufacturing unit, or procured the arms and ammunition from other states, such as

Uttar Pradesh and Assam.

Also on the ATS radar is a graphics firm run by another of the arrested, Sudhanwa Gondhalekar, who is a member

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of the Shri Shivpratishtan Hindustan headed by Sambhaji Bhide who was booked in two cases in connection with the violence near Bhima Koregaon on January 1.

Sources said that the ATS recovered a chit detailing how to assemble a bomb from the third accused, Sharad Kasalkar (25), who was arrested from Raut's Nala Sopara residence. "While probing the role of Virendra Tawde, the ENT specialist who was arrested from Panvel in connection with the murders of Pune-based rationalist Narendra Dabholkar and CPI leader Govind Pansare, the CBI and SIT stumbled upon coded emails. They were between Tawde and wanted accused and Sanatan Sanstha member Sarang Akolkar on the need to set up an arms manufacturing unit in Maharashtra," said another officer associated with the probe.

"Our probe will focus on finding out if Gondhalekar managed to float an unit or if the arrested accused managed to get in touch with arms suppliers from other states who helped them obtain this cache of weapons and ammunition," he said.

Tawde is a member of the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (HJS), which is an offshoot of the Sanatan Sanstha.

"The two shared numerous emails be-

tween 2008 and 2013. In emails exchanged between 2009 and 2010, the two discussed sahitya (literature)... in one of the emails, Tawde spoke about setting up a karkhana (factory)... Another email stated that 'desi sahitya' was available in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh while 'videshi sahitya' was available in Assam," said the official.

"During sustained interrogation, Tawde revealed that the emails contained code words and the plan of the outfit was to raise an army of 15,000 sevaks for establishing a Hindu state... The word 'karkhana' was a code used for a weapons unit, which Tawde wanted to set up," a senior CBI official probing the Dabholkar case said.

Raut, Kasalkar and Gondhalekar were arrested from Nala Sopara and Satara in multiple raids by the ATS, which said they were affiliated to radical Hindu outfits. The ATS also said that with the recovery of a huge cache of explosives, including live crude bombs and gelatin sticks, they had averted major terror attacks at multiple places.

On Saturday, the ATS reported the seizure of "11 countrymade pistols with magazines, one airgun, 10 pistol barrels, six pistol magazines, six partially made

pistol bodies, three partially made magazines, seven partially made pistol slides, several partially made parts of firearms".

The seizure of partially made pistol parts along with countrymade pistols suggests that some of those arrested are involved in the illegal manufacture or assembly of firearms, said sources in Karnataka Police who are closely following developments in Maharashtra.

ATS sources said that during initial questioning, all the three accused claimed innocence and blamed each other for the bombs and other ammunition. "Raut claimed that he was not aware that they were bombs and that he had kept the consignment for safe-keeping on the request of the other two accused. The other two have been claiming that the explosives were found at Raut's residence and they had nothing to do with them," an official said.

Bhide's organisation has claimed that Gondhalekar was just a worker and not actively involved in any of its activities over the last 4-5 years. But an article in Sanstha publication 'Sanatan Prabhat' on June 15, 2017, identifies Gondhalekar as a member of Bhide's outfit.

(WITH INPUTS BY JOHNSON T A IN BENGALURU)