

Malaysia

Incident at Kerling

The danger signs had been there for months. When vandals ransacked a Hindu temple last December, government officials quickly drew a veil of secrecy over the incident and instructed police to nab the culprits without further ado. But that was easier said than done: within weeks another Hindu temple was hit, then another, till finally it was clear that the "vandals" were engaged in nothing less than a private religious war. Last week, that eerie and almost mystical conflict claimed its first human casualties.

It began in the sultry, dark stillness of Saturday morning at Kerling, a small town astride the railway tracks 35 mi. north of Kuala Lumpur. According to police accounts, a car drove up to the gates of Subramaniam Temple at 2:30 a.m. One or two of the vehicle's occupants got out and stealthily broke the lock on the gates. Then the car was driven into the temple compound.

The intruders were watched all along by a guard, crouched near the entrance to the temple. Only the day before, police had appealed to Hindu leaders to make their holy places safe against intruders. Thus, in those pre-dawn hours, Subramaniam Temple was protected by not one guard but ten; some of them, at least, were armed with knives.

When the watchman on duty saw that five strangers were in the car, he swiftly loped off to warn the resident priest. Together, they crept back into the main temple and awoke the nine other vigilantes sleeping there. Still silent, the eleven men watched three persons leave the car and enter a smaller adjoining temple; a few moments later came the sounds of statues of the deities being smashed with iron bars. (Later, authorities said nine images in the side temple had been destroyed.)

As the three intruders left the smaller temple and headed for the main one, their two friends quit the car and joined them. At that point they were confronted by the priest and seven of the Hindu guards. One of the vigilantes had sped away to a nearby house to enlist the help of an elderly and respected Muslim *haji*; two others had been dispatched to the Kerling Police Station, a half-mile distant.

But by the time the 75-year-old *haji* arrived on the scene, fighting had already broken out between the guards and the intruders. Said a police official later: "The *haji* was slashed on the

hand and neck when he tried to intervene." Minutes later, when the cops turned up, one of the strangers was dead and his four associates lay grievously injured; three died soon afterwards, in hospital.

If the incident itself was enough to send a chill up the spines of those who learned of it, other aspects of the affair were equally sobering. Among the dead were a teacher from a leading secondary school in Kuala Lumpur and two undergraduates from a Malaysian university; the sole survivor among the intruders was a young medical student, home on vacation from Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia.

The affair at the Subramaniam Temple involved two groups who differed not merely in race but in



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Prime Minister Hussein; Hindu temple deity: A plea for tolerance

religion. The government of Prime Minister Hussein Onn thus reacted with singular care. When the news reached Kuala Lumpur on Saturday morning, the Member of Parliament for the Kerling district, Michael Chen — who is also Housing and Local Government Minister — immediately headed north to investigate. With him went his Deputy Minister, Samy Vellu, who happens to be deputy president of the Malaysian Indian Congress. (Like Chen's party, the Malaysian Chinese Association, the MIC is a partner in the *Barisan Nasional*, the 10-party ruling coalition dominated by Hussein's United Malays National Organisation.)

It was three days before the police

issued a statement. They said the ten Hindu guards had been detained. Even before then, however, watchful citizens could see that the Administration was intent on preventing any ill-feeling from spreading.

On the evening after the killings, Prime Minister Hussein opened Malaysia's annual Koran Reading Championship, and used the occasion to plead for tolerance between Muslims and their non-Muslim countrymen. Many who watched Hussein on television noted that he spoke with unusual vigour and insistence.

Senior Assistant Commissioner Liew Weng Lin, deputy chief of Malaysia's Criminal Investigation Dept., noted that there had been at least 23 assaults on Hindu temples throughout the country since December. But fully thirteen of those incidents have occurred in the past three weeks, and

most of those were directed at temples in towns lying along the main road from Jasin in Malacca to Telok Anson in southern Perak State.

There are some 650,000 Indian Hindus in Malaysia, representing about 5% of the country's population. Islam is the religion of state, but freedom of belief is guaranteed by law. In the final analysis, that guarantee — and lawyer Hussein's own deep personal commitment to Malaysian pluralism — will likely prevent further Kerling-type tragedies. Nonetheless, last week's bloodshed at the Subramaniam Temple served as a grim and perhaps timely reminder that religious intolerance and righteous wrath is a volatile and dangerous mix indeed.