

Militia groups active in 13 states across U.S.

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For half a year, David Hollister has been trying to erase the memory of his showdown with right-wing extremists.

But the mayor of Lansing, Mich., yesterday recalled the events of last fall after it was revealed two suspects in the Oklahoma City bombing may have links to the same citizens' militia group that crashed his seemingly innocent United Nations Day celebration at city hall.

"There were 200 of them dressed in fatigues and we couldn't tell if they were armed or not," Hollister said, replaying the Oct. 24 incident.

"It was terrifying."

At the protest, organized by leaders of the Michigan Militia, school children were taunted and Hollister said police had to hold back demonstrators while he raised the U.N. flag, a civic tradition more than a decade old.

"They said I was an agent of some foreign government, that the ceremony was a Communist conspiracy and talked of Russian tanks in northern Michigan," Hollister said.

"They view themselves as the last vestige of hope for democracy."

Militia leaders said at the time the U.N. flag is a source of global domination and America's sovereignty was being threatened.

Similar citizens' militias, which are said to have about 10,000 members in Michigan, are reported to have sprung up over the last year in that state and at least twelve others.

Searching for clues in the Oklahoma investigation, FBI agents yesterday entered a farmhouse in Decker, Mich., the town reported to be the headquarters of the Michigan Militia.

"The Michigan Militia started out as a group of basically extreme libertarians who distrust the government and who focus on gun ownership," John Nutter, an assistant professor at Michigan State University, told The Star.

"In Michigan they have conducted paramilitary training exercises - they go running around the woods in camouflage with guns," he said.

Nutter said that while the bombing would seem out of character with the philosophy of the militias, "there is a novel, a right-wing, Nazi fantasy which is a bible of the right-wing movement in which a small group of 'Aryan mercenaries' attack and destroy the FBI in Washington with a fertilizer bomb."

The Michigan Militia is part of a movement that has been described as being obsessed by the fate of the Branch Davidian cult, which set itself aflame, killing 70 members, rather than surrender to federal agents in a bloody standoff on April 19, 1993 - two years to the day of the Oklahoma disaster.

But Michigan Militia officials deny any part in the bombing.

"Our stand in the militia is defensive," chief of staff Ray Southwell said. "This obviously had nothing to do with defence."

Prior to the U.N. flag protest, Southwell told the Detroit Free Press: "Enough is enough. I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States. Do we remember that anymore?"

Experts in this country yesterday warned that racist groups with ties to suspects in the Oklahoma City bombing are Canada's biggest terrorist threat.

"They're dedicated, they're armed," said Warren Kinsella, author of Web of Hate: Inside Canada's Far Right Network.

"They're recruiting. They've demonstrated a tendency to violence."

And the links between Canadian right-wing extremists and their American counterparts have always been cozy, Kinsella said.

"Whenever things get hot, they (Canadian neo-Nazis) head down to the States," Kinsella said.

The author added that Woodbridge neo-Nazi George Burdi had been spending a great deal of time in Michigan, considered by American authorities to be one of the three most active centres for U.S. right-wing militia activity.

Burdi, an insurance salesman and singer in the band RaHoWa (Racial Holy War), was convicted of assault causing bodily harm last week in Ottawa for kicking an anti-Nazi activist in the face at a melee at the Canadian War Memorial in May, 1993.

Toronto Heritage Front leader Wolfgang Droege was also involved in the action by neo-Nazis and skinheads.

What is the Michigan Militia?

Suspects in the Oklahoma City bombing are thought to be members of this radical anti-government group based in Michigan:

What they believe:

- * Say gun control is broad conspiracy to bring about world government under NATO or the "socialist" U.N.

- * Against any laws banning weapons, attacks by Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) and FBI on Branch Davidians in Texas.

Other facts:

- * Started 1994 in Emmet County, Mich., organized in 66% of state's counties.

- * Claim over 12,000 members with affiliates in at least 9 states.

With files from the Chicago Tribune

SA1 headline reads: Showdown with militia 'terrifying,'

Caption: 2 AP PHOTOS: MILITIA MEN: Members of the right-wing extremist group the Michigan Militia train during exercises near Saline, Mich., in December, 1994; HOUSE RAIDED: FBI agents enter a farmhouse yesterday in Decker, Mich.,

yesterday searching for evidence in Wednesday's bombing in Oklahoma City. (SA1 edition)

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