Pannun murder plot: Nikhil Gupta sentenced to 235 months

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Prelims: India-US relations, extradition, international law | Published: 21 November 2026



मौलिक प्रतीकात्मक चित्र: pcsmantra.com

Why in news

A United States federal court on 20 November 2026 sentenced Indian national Nikhil Gupta (55) to 235 months (about nineteen and a half years) in prison. According to the US Department of Justice, Gupta took part in a plot to kill Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a US-based American citizen of Indian origin. Gupta had pleaded guilty in February 2026 to murder-for-hire, conspiracy to commit murder-for-hire, and conspiracy to commit money laundering.

Background of the case

- **The alleged plot**: US prosecutors say that in 2023, while in India, Gupta worked with co-defendant Vikash Yadav to plan the killing. The prosecution claims Yadav was then an employee of the Government of India.
- **How it unravelled**: The "criminal associate" Gupta approached was in fact a confidential source working with the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and the "hitman" was a DEA undercover officer. A price of $100,000 was agreed; $15,000 was paid as an advance on 9 June 2023.
- **The Nijjar link**: After Hardeep Singh Nijjar was killed in Canada on 18 June 2023, Gupta allegedly said there was "now no need to wait"; he had also instructed that Pannun should not be killed around the Indian Prime Minister's state visit to the US in June 2023.
- **Arrest and extradition**: Gupta was arrested in the Czech Republic on 30 June 2023 and extradited to the US in June 2024.
- **Yadav's status**: Vikash Yadav has been charged but has not been arrested in connection with those US charges.

Legal aspects

- **Murder-for-hire**: Under US federal law, hiring a killer and conspiring to do so are serious standalone offences; the money-laundering conspiracy count relates to the payment trail.
- **Jurisdiction**: The Justice Department stressed it will prosecute anyone plotting violence on US soil or against US citizens "no matter where they are located", an expansive use of jurisdiction.
- **Guilty plea**: Gupta's February 2026 plea meant there was no trial; the case came straight to the sentencing stage.

Implications for India-US ties

The case tests both criminal-justice cooperation and bilateral trust. On 15 January 2025, India's Home Ministry said that a high-powered enquiry committee, set up in November 2023, had submitted its report. It recommended prompt legal action against an individual and improvements in systems and procedures. The release did not name that individual. Gupta's sentence is not a conviction of co-defendant Yadav: an allegation and a judicial finding must remain distinct.

Way forward

Extradition means surrendering an accused or convicted person to another country for criminal proceedings. Mutual legal assistance (MLA) can cover evidence, documents and investigative cooperation, and is distinct from extradition. Track judicial proceedings separately from official diplomatic statements. The exam issue is how sovereignty, citizen safety and lawful cooperation can be balanced.

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Mains practice question

Question: "The sentencing in the Pannun case highlights the tension between state sovereignty, jurisdiction and diplomatic relations." Comment. (250 words, 15 marks)

Answer outline

Introduction:
brief background of the case.

Main body:
the jurisdictional rationale for prosecuting plots hatched abroad; cooperation tools such as extradition and MLAT; India's official enquiry recommendations; effect on bilateral trust and intelligence cooperation; citizen security versus sovereignty in international law.

Conclusion:
institutional dialogue and law-based resolution is the durable path.

FAQ

In short: A US court sentenced Nikhil Gupta to 235 months in prison in the Pannun murder-for-hire plot; the plot dates to 2023, he was arrested in the Czech Republic and extradited in June 2024.

Q: What were the charges against Nikhil Gupta?

Murder-for-hire, conspiracy to commit murder-for-hire, and conspiracy to commit money laundering; he pleaded guilty in February 2026.

Q: What has India officially said about its enquiry?

In January 2025, the Home Ministry reported the committee's recommendation for legal action against an unnamed individual and improvements in systems and procedures.

Q: Who is Vikash Yadav and what is his status?

Gupta's co-defendant in the US indictment; he has not been arrested in connection with those charges and the case against him is open.

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Sources

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2. Ministry of Home Affairs, enquiry committee report (15 January 2025): https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleseDetailm.aspx?PRID=2093056&lang=2&reg=48
3. UNODC, Extradition: meaning and process: https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/organized-crime/module-11/key-issues/extradition.html