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Two more JNU students arrested

AFP, New Delhi

Indian police yesterday said they had arrested two students wanted in a sedition case that has sparked major protests after the pair gave themselves up following nearly two weeks on the run.

Umar Khalid and Anirban Bhattacharya surrendered to police at midnight on Tuesday after a court refused to grant them protection from arrest over a rally at their university, at which a group allegedly shouted anti-India slogans.

The pair is accused of being among the organisers of the event at the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi. The February 9 rally was held to mark the hanging of Afzal Guru over a deadly attack on India's parliament in 2001. Guru denied plotting the attack carried out by Kashmiri separatists and some say he was not given a fair trial.

They face the same charge as JNU student union leader Kanhaiya Kumar, whose arrest earlier this month has brought thousands of students and

teachers onto the streets.

The two students have said they went into hiding out of fear for their safety following the attack on Kumar, but were ready to face justice.

They accuse Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government of misusing the British-era

SEDITION ROW IN INDIA



Student activist Umar Khalid (C) and Anirban Bhattacharya (L) pictured at JNU campus on Tuesday. PHOTO: AFP

sedition law to crack down on dissent.

Rights activists have long urged India to repeal the law, which carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment

and has frequently been used against critics of the government of the day.

Many were outraged when Kumar was assaulted by right-wing lawyers as he appeared in court for a preliminary hearing last week in an apparently orchestrated attack.

The latest arrests come amid mounting concern about freedom of speech in India. Several authors last year returned a prestigious award in protest at what they called government inaction over the murder of atheist scholars and the lynching of a Muslim man suspected of eating beef.

Khalid and Bhattacharya were scheduled to be produced before the court later yesterday.

The case has caused outrage at both ends of the political spectrum. On Wednesday the student wing of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came out on the streets to defend the government's actions.

The left-leaning Congress party has been particularly vocal in support of the JNU students.