

Pakistan explodes nuclear device

Gathering war clouds in South Asia

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With Pakistan's detonation of a nuclear device May 28, South Asia has been brought to the brink of a fourth Indo-Pakistani war. In justifying its staging of a nuclear test, Pakistan charged that India was about to launch an air strike on its nuclear test site. India has vigorously denied this charge, but in the days preceding the Pakistani test leading Indian government officials repeatedly warned that Indian troops might soon cross into Pakistani-occupied Kashmir.

The more the ruling cliques in New Delhi and Islamabad exchange threats, brandish nuclear devices, missiles and other weapons of mass destruction, and make appeals for "national unity," the more apparent it becomes that they are on a common trajectory. The national bourgeoisie of each country is seeking to use chauvinism and militarism to divert attention from its reactionary socioeconomic policies and channel mounting social anxiety and frustration in a reactionary direction.

The workers and oppressed masses of India and Pakistan must vigorously oppose the campaigns of their respective governments to incite chauvinism and mutual hatred, the ultimate logic of which is another bloody conflict between the two countries.

The eruption of militarism on the Indian subcontinent is by no means, however, a merely regional crisis. It is of the greatest concern to working people the world over. The onset of a nuclear arms race in South Asia is an expression of profound, global contradictions.

For all the talk, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, of a "new world order" of peace and stability, international politics in the post-Cold War period have become increasingly volatile and explosive. The technological revolution and the global integration of finance and production are breaking up the old relations between states and intensifying the struggle between rival groups of capitalists, and their corporate and state structures, for profits and geopolitical influence.

The tensions and conflicts between the major capitalist powers of North America, Europe and Asia have grown more acute and more public. So riven are the great powers by disparate claims and interests, they are barely able to make a pretense of fashioning a common strategy on any major international question.

The unstable state of world capitalist relations has in recent weeks found explosive expression. This past month has seen the Indonesian strongman Suharto driven from power, a collapse of the Russian stock market and growing concern over the viability of Japan's financial system.

US President Bill Clinton, in announcing the imposition of American sanctions against Pakistan, alluded to the political turmoil and military conflagrations that dominated the first half of the twentieth century. Said Clinton: "I cannot believe that we are about to start the twenty-first century by having the Indian subcontinent repeat the worst mistakes of the twentieth century."

Clinton's concern is well grounded. But he is operating under enormous illusions if he thinks the disasters of this century can be explained by the "mistakes" of individual leaders. The renewed threat of nuclear war underscores that the mass bloodletting of the twentieth century was rooted not in subjective errors, but rather in social contradictions that have yet to find a progressive resolution.

There is, of course, an enormous element of hypocrisy in the pacifistic lecturing of Washington and other imperialist capitals. Clinton may scold India and Pakistan on the dangers of war, but that does not prevent him from repeatedly threatening mass destruction against Iraq and using America's vast conventional and nuclear arsenal to bully other countries that run afoul of Washington's economic and geopolitical aims.

For the past 15 years, the US has increasingly relied on its military might to compensate for its loss of world economic hegemony. As the Indian and Pakistani governments have been quick to point out, Washington's pious denunciations of nuclear proliferation are entirely self-serving. They are motivated by an attempt to maintain a preponderance of military might, not by support for disarmament.

The Indo-Pakistani conflict is itself rooted in the imperialist oppression of South Asia. The British colonial rulers fomented religious and national-ethnic divisions to safeguard their rule. Then, when forced to cede political control to the national bourgeoisie, they partitioned the subcontinent, dividing it along religious lines into a mainly Hindu India and a Moslem Pakistan.

As imperialism's policeman in the aftermath of World War II, the US supported the reactionary state system established in South Asia in 1947-48, and worked to stoke up the Pakistani-Indian conflict. From the early 1950s, Pakistan was closely allied with the US, which supported one military regime after another in Islamabad. In the 1980s, Pakistan became entangled in the CIA's Afghan adventure, as the US funneled money and arms through Pakistani-based Muslim fundamentalists. These groups are today among those most active in inciting Pakistan against its neighbor. India meanwhile was denied access to advanced technology, because, as an ally of the Soviet Union, it did not tailor its foreign

policy to Washington's dictates.

In the recent period, the US and the other imperialist powers have exerted massive pressure for the elimination of all restrictions on foreign capital, as well as the scrapping of price controls and subsidies, privatization, and the dismantling of social welfare policies. These dictates of international banks and imperialist governments have intensified the conditions of poverty, unemployment and hunger that have always plagued both countries, exacerbating the social turmoil, anxieties and frustrations which the nationalist and religious chauvinists on both sides of the border exploit.

The political bankruptcy of bourgeois rule

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif employed apocalyptic language in his May 28 televised address announcing the nuclear tests. "Today, we have settled the score with India," he declared. "Today the nuclear flames of the nuclear fire are all over. I am thankful to God that ... we have jumped into these flames..." Subsequently, Pakistan raised the ante by announcing that its Gauri missile would soon be armed with nuclear warheads.

Unquestionably, the sanctions that are to be applied by the US, Japan and several other countries will have a major impact on the Pakistani economy. Fearing a run on the banks, the Sharif government ordered them closed Friday, May 29, then announced an indefinite freeze on withdrawing foreign currency from foreign denomination accounts. As Pakistan has only \$1 billion in foreign exchange reserves, equal to about six weeks' worth of imports, there are fears that Pakistan may default on \$800 million in interest payments that come due next month.

From an economic standpoint, sanctions and an arms race with India can only be detrimental to the Pakistani bourgeoisie, but the political dynamics are such that the Sharif government had little choice but to proceed with the nuclear tests. Sharif's political opponents, including Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party and various Muslim fundamentalist groups, were threatening to launch mass agitation against his Pakistan Muslim League government if a nuclear test was not staged.

Even more importantly, the military seized on the emergence of the Hindu chauvinist BJP regime in New Delhi to press for a reversal of major military spending cuts that had been implemented by Pakistani governments in recent years. During the past five decades, the Pakistani ruling class has repeatedly allowed the military to wield political power, in the hope it could contain popular unrest and bitter conflicts between various regional elites.

National and religious chauvinism has been the principal ideological prop of the Islamabad regime. The claim that Pakistan is in imminent danger of being engulfed by "Hindu" India has been used to divert social tensions against a "foreign enemy," and promote the belief that Pakistani workers must unite with their landlord and capitalist oppressors.

The same ideology has been employed to prevent rivalries between various regional cliques and conflicts over scant resources

from causing the Pakistani state to collapse. (As it is, Pakistan's second largest state, Sind, and its principal city and port, Karachi, have been convulsed for close to a decade by a national-ethnic conflict between Sindhis and Urdu-speakers.) Were Pakistan's rulers not to respond to India, to use Sharif's own words, "in kind," the political and ideological basis of the Pakistani state would be called into question.

Both India's BJP government and Sharif's regime will use the threat of war to attack democratic rights. Within hours of the nuclear test announcement, Pakistani President Rafiq Tarar declared a state of emergency, suspending the constitution and civil rights. For its part, the BJP government in India is labeling all opponents of its aggressive stance against Pakistan as "disloyal."

The ruling classes in both countries will seek to place the burden of the economic problems created by sanctions on the masses. In his address, Sharif conceded that economic sanctions would have a devastating effect, pledging that if Pakistanis are reduced to eating "one meal a day, then my children will only take one meal a day." It has subsequently emerged, however, that the most powerful business supporters of Sharif, himself a wealthy industrialist, were forewarned of the nuclear test so that they could transfer much of their foreign-currency holdings out of Pakistan.

Fifty years after the establishment of India and Pakistan, the rule of the Indian and Pakistani national bourgeoisies has brought the masses of South Asia to the brink of a nuclear catastrophe. In both countries, tens of millions lack the most elementary necessities—access to proper sanitation, clean water, housing and food. This past week, while the politicians in New Delhi were boasting of India's nuclear capabilities, many of the capital's 11 million residents were left without electricity or water for up to 10 hours at a time, with temperatures in excess of 45 degrees centigrade. Enraged by the indifference of government officials, residents in some of Delhi's poorest neighborhoods attacked municipal and BJP offices.

None of the burning social issues—the eradication of landlordism, caste oppression and communal strife, or the provision of basic public services—has been resolved under the national bourgeoisie. On the contrary, the barbaric remnants of pre-capitalist forms of exploitation have become intertwined with capitalist production relations.

The threat of war in South Asia is the barbaric expression of the accumulation of explosive contradictions born of gaping social inequality and injustice. It is up to the working class to find a progressive solution to these contradictions by intervening as an independent political force and leading the oppressed masses in a struggle against the rule of the national bourgeoisie and imperialism, in unity with the international working class.

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