

After the airline hijack ends, India steps up its verbal attacks on Pakistan

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The hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight 814 ended last Friday with the freeing of 155 hostages in exchange for the release of three Kashmiri separatists held in Indian jails. But the political repercussions within India and throughout the subcontinent are far from over. The eight-day standoff at Kandahar airport in Afghanistan has provoked sharp criticisms of the Indian government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee by opposition parties and the media, and further heightened tensions between India and Pakistan.

Immediately after the end of the siege, India stepped up its verbal attacks on Pakistan. On Saturday, Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said that there were “sufficient” indications to believe that Pakistan was behind the hijacking, claiming that during negotiations the hijackers had been consulting with a “third force”. Singh pledged that India's fight against terrorism would continue and the hijack would be “retributed and justice sought”.

The following day, Brajesh Mishra, National Security Advisor to the prime minister, said on the Star TV network that India had “clear evidence to prove Pakistan's involvement... the Pakistani establishment is certainly responsible for this.” He repeated claims that the hijackers were Pakistani nationals, that two of the three prisoners exchanged by India for the hostages were Pakistani-nationals, and that the group, after leaving the plane, was heading towards Pakistan.

But Mishra failed to offer any firm proof of the Pakistan government's participation in the hijacking, simply referring to further evidence including Indian intelligence intercepts of conversations between Kashmiri separatist groups within Kashmir itself. Few details were provided and no transcript of the electronic intercepts has been so far released.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar dismissed the Indian allegations as “trumped-up charges” and retorted said that India itself had “an abhorrent record of state terrorism”. Indian security forces seeking to stamp out Kashmiri separatist groups have a long record of torture, disappearances and abuse of democratic rights in the Indian-controlled state of Jammu and Kashmir. He reiterated that Pakistan had condemned the hijacking and would arrest the hijackers if they entered its territory.

Vajpayee turned up the political temperature another notch on

Monday by directly accusing Pakistan of orchestrating the hijacking and calling for it to be branded as a terrorist state. “All the information now available with the government about the hijack makes it clear that it was an integral part of the Pakistan-backed campaign of terrorism,” he said. “Pakistan's active and sustained role in fomenting terrorism in India is now too obvious to be overlooked by the international community. India therefore, strongly urges major nations of the world to declare Pakistan a terrorist state.”

In particular, Vajpayee urged the Clinton administration to take the initiative in isolating Pakistan. He is no doubt seeking to capitalise on a discernable shift in US relations towards India during the crisis last year, precipitated by the occupation of key strategic positions in the Kargil area of Kashmir by Pakistan-backed militia. Washington put considerable pressure on Islamabad to pull its forces out of the area and since then has sought, through a number of high-level meetings, to forge a closer relationship with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition government in India.

While the Clinton administration has ruled out designating Pakistan a terrorist state, it has already held discussions with India over security matters including the activities of the Saudi billionaire Osama bin Ladan, who is alleged to have masterminded the bombing of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. During the hijacking crisis, US intelligence agencies provided India with information about various Kashmiri separatist groups.

The primary reason for Vajpayee's strident attack on Pakistan is to deflect criticisms at home, including within the BJP, over the exchange arranged with the hijackers. The *Statesman* newspaper in India reported over the weekend that Home Minister L.K. Advani had expressed his “severe displeasure” over the tradeoff and had offered to resign, but had been talked into remaining in his post. Both Vajpayee and Advani have since played down rumours of dissension within the BJP's ranks as the government has come under pressure.

During the siege, the families of hostages staged a number of protests in New Delhi to demand a deal be reached that would guarantee the safe release of their relatives. In the aftermath of the crisis, the opposition parties and the media have intensified their condemnation of the government for failing to take

tougher action.

V.R. Raghavan, a former Director-General of Military Operations, writing in the *Hindu* on Tuesday described the outcome as “a major success for international terrorism,” saying it would “bring more individuals fired by the jehadic spirit to the terrorist cause. Other elements within India with a sense of deprivation, and disgruntled with the state's apathy to their needs, will be encouraged by the success of terrorism.”

Like others, he berated the government for failing to prevent the aircraft from leaving Indian soil when it landed briefly for refueling at Amritsar. “Both control over the situation and the major advantage of a quick, armed response were lost. It could not, thereafter, mount an armed action to storm the aircraft and free the hostages, which could have been easily done on Indian soil.”

The *Indian Express* in its editorial on Monday entitled “Dancing with the Wolves” commented on the BJP's failure to live up to their own hard-line rhetoric and jingoism. “For the Vajpayee government, that had always trumpeted its commitment to fighting terrorism with an almost Churchillian rhetoric, the surrender at Kandahar comes as a reversal. Suddenly the words of yesterday like ‘zero tolerance for terrorism,’ ‘an Indian century,’ ‘India as a hard state,’ have come to mock it today at the beginning of a new era. Not only does it now have to stomach the Opposition's wrath laced in irony, it finds its cardinal foreign policy positions in disarray now that the force of circumstances have compelled it to make an uneasy truce with the Taliban.”

As during the Kargil crisis, some of the most vehement attacks on the BJP government came from the so-called left leaderships of India's Stalinist parties: the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPI-M). The parties have condemned the BJP from the right, accusing it of undermining the Indian national interests, of kowtowing to the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and of subverting the operations of the Indian military in Kashmir itself.

Lining up with those who sought a commando operation to storm the aircraft, CPI General Secretary A.B. Bardhan said that the government could not shrug off the “bungling” at Amritsar. “The government landed itself into a situation in which it had to yield to the hijackers' demand for the release of some of the most notorious terrorists.”

CPI-M Secretary Harkishan Singh Surjeet accused the prime minister of a cover-up and has demanded a “high-level independent inquiry” to “uncover the facts” and fix responsibility for the “blunder”. He said that Vajpayee had phoned him in Calcutta on Friday to invite him to an all-party meeting but had said nothing about the deal. The “overall interests” of the nation had been “ignored” while releasing the militants.

In comments reported in the *Hindu*, Surjeet branded the decision as a “big betrayal of the cause of Kashmir”. Fully

supporting the repressive measures used by the Indian military in Jammu and Kashmir, he said that the release of the three militants in return for the freeing of the hostages would have a debilitating effect on the security environment in Kashmir and undo the efforts to curb militancy in the state.

One little publicised fact is that the three prisoners—Masood Azhar, Ahmed Umar Saeed Sheikh and Mushtaq Ahmed Zargar—released in exchange for the hostages had never been tried or found guilty of any crime in an Indian court. They had all been held without trial for lengthy periods for their alleged connections to the armed Kashmiri separatist group Harkat-ul-Mujahadeen.

Under India's draconian security legislation, the police and military are effectively able to round up and imprison suspects indefinitely. The Public Safety Act allows for two-year detention without trial. However if detainees are due to be released, fresh charges are concocted and the prisoner is “re-arrested” before ever being set free. Others are still being held under the Terrorism and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA), even though it lapsed in May 1995. According to an editorial in the *Hindu*, there are still as many as 4,958 TADA cases under trial or investigation throughout India, including 684 in Jammu and Kashmir.

The hijacking is just the latest incident seized upon by both the Pakistani and Indian governments as an opportunity to beat the nationalist drum in order to divert attention from the economic, political and social crisis within their respective countries. Ever since the partition of India by the British in 1947 into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India, governments in both countries have whipped up nationalist and communalist sentiment to divide the working class and oppressed masses in order to maintain their own precarious hold on power.

In the aftermath of the hijacking, tensions within Kashmir are certain to escalate. On Monday, a land mine exploded in a vegetable market outside Srinagar killing 17 people and wounding 31 others. Last week heavily armed fighters attacked and occupied a camp of the Indian security forces' Special Operations Group. The ongoing war of attrition between Kashmiri separatists and Indian security forces ensures that Kashmir remains a powder keg, with the potential to ignite conflict between Pakistan and India once again.



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