

US insists on resumption of talks between India and Kashmir separatists

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14 August 2000

Continuing its year-long intervention into the Kashmir crisis, the United States administration has called on the Indian government and Kashmir separatists to resume their first-ever official talks, despite last week's ceasefire breakdown and a serious car bomb blast in Srinagar, the summer capital of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Truce talks between Kashmir separatists and the New Delhi government broke down when Hizbul Mujahideen, a major pro-Pakistani separatist group, ended a 15-day-old ceasefire on August 8.

The Hizbul group had started the talks with the Indian regime on August 3, but its central leader Salahuddin, revoked the ceasefire when India rejected his demand for the inclusion of Pakistan in the discussions. Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, speaking in parliament on August 7, categorically ruled out any involvement of Pakistan.

Two days after calling off the talks, Hizbul Mujahideen claimed responsibility for the Srinagar blast, which was followed by a hand grenade explosion in the city last Saturday. The events triggered mutual recriminations between Vajpayee's government and the Pakistani military junta led by General Parvez Musharraf, each blaming the other for destroying the peace initiative.

The US call for the resumption of the talks was the second statement from Washington in two days. A State Department official told the *Hindu* newspaper on August 8, the day that the Hizbul pulled out: "We urge all sides to nurture and continue a process of peace in Kashmir... We welcomed the initiation of the discussion between India and the Hizbul Mujahideen and we encourage the resumption." The US spokesman was cautious in commenting on Hizbul's insistence on Pakistan's participation in talks. "The decision on how the talks are structured needs to be made by the parties involved," he said.

The Clinton administration is being urged on by key elements of the American ruling establishment, reflected in a *New York Times* editorial of August 11. "Washington should press both sides to come back to the table without preconditions," it said. "Every reasonable effort must be made to avoid a new Kashmir war." The editorial implied that the White House should prevail upon the Hizbul Mujahideen to drop its insistence that Pakistan be represented at the talks.

On August 3, the day that the talks commenced, Clinton phoned Vajpayee to congratulate him and to condemn the massacres of nearly 100 people, including Hindu pilgrims and migrant labourers, in south Kashmir on the previous two days. A rival Kashmir separatist group opposed to the Hizbul's ceasefire was believed to be responsible for the killings. When Vajpayee accused Pakistan of backing such activities, Clinton reportedly promised to raise the issue with Pakistani leaders.

After a special meeting of its Cabinet Committee on Security on August 8, the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led Vajpayee government publicly declared its keenness to revive the talks. A statement expressed regret over Hizbul's termination of the truce, accused Pakistan of putting pressure on the group, and called upon Hizbul and other separatist groups to negotiate.

The August 3 talks were held after the Indian government responded to a unilateral three-month ceasefire announced by Hizbul on July 24. In contrast to earlier Indian offers of limited negotiations, the government invited the group to unconditional talks and suspended military operations against it. Vajpayee's government also proposed talks with the All Party Hurriyat Conference, an umbrella organisation representing dozens of separatist groups, which are fighting for an independent Kashmir or a merger with neighbouring Pakistan.

Subsequently, however, Vajpayee ruled out any talks with the Pakistani government until the Musharraf regime stopped backing "cross-border terrorism"—a reference to Islamabad's support for Kashmir separatist groups operating from Pakistan. Vajpayee also declared that while talks with Hizbul were unconditional, any settlement had to be within the Indian Constitution.

The turn towards talks has unfolded since July last year, when US President Clinton secured an agreement from Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to withdraw armed intruders from the Kargil heights in Indian Kashmir, when India and Pakistan were on the brink of a war.

That intervention showed that US support had tilted towards India, shifting from the Cold War policy of backing Pakistan. US pressure on Pakistan heightened after October 12 last year when the military chief, Musharraf, who was the original architect of the Kargil intrusion, ousted Sharif. The US has urged the Musharraf regime to contain the operations of various

Pakistani-based Muslim fundamentalist armed groups, including the Kashmir separatists, and to open talks with India.

A month before Clinton's visit to the Indian sub-continent, the New York-based Kashmir Study Group (KSG) issued a report. Led by influential US Kashmir businessman Farooq Kathwari, the KSG included US Congressmen and former diplomats. It proposed that the Indian state of Kashmir and the Pakistan-controlled part of Kashmir become two sovereign entities or be merged into a single state with control over its own defence and foreign affairs.

With these US initiatives afoot, senior Hizbul commanders reportedly sent out ceasefire feelers to the Indian government via a US-based Kashmiri early this year. In response, the Indian Prime Minister's Office sent an intermediary to Pakistan where Hizbul leaders are based, to begin a secret dialogue. In April, India allowed Hizbul commander Abdul Majid Dar to return to Indian Kashmir with guarantees of protection from army units, to engage in discussions with his juniors.

The Vajpayee government also released several All Party Hurriyat Conference leaders from jail in April and May and offered talks within the Constitution. Hurriyat leaders expressed their readiness to negotiate, while rejecting the government's pre-condition. Unofficial talks and contacts proceeded.

During the same period, a group of politicians and officials, including a rebel from the National Conference (NC) government of the Indian Kashmir state, ex-cabinet minister Saifuddin Soz, and V.K. Grover, a former officer in the Indian Home Ministry dealing with Kashmir, travelled to Washington. Before departing, they had reportedly held wide-ranging talks with Kashmir separatist groups and some individuals.

These moves sparked a reaction from the NC Kashmir state government of Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah. On June 26 it passed an Autonomy Bill, demanding wider self-rule for the state, leaving only defence, external affairs and communications in the hands of the central government. But the Delhi government, in which the NC is also a partner, rejected the plan outright.

It seems that the Kashmir government may not be happy about being bypassed in any settlement between the central government and the Kashmir separatists. A severe political crisis has erupted within the ruling alliance, stoking tensions between the BJP and the NC. Both sides are currently engaged in discussions, toning down earlier statements.

Under severe US and international economic and political pressure, the Indian and Pakistani governments are anxious to win the favour of the US. Both Vajpayee and Musharraf are now scheduled to visit the US in mid-September. Pakistani Information Minister Javed Jabber said on August 12 that the two leaders might meet at the United Nations in New York.

While Musharraf's government has officially denied any part in Hizbul's truce offer, it is unlikely that the group has acted without Pakistan's consent, given that Hizbul is strongly backed

by Pakistan and operates from there. If there is any deal on Kashmir, the Pakistani military regime wants to be a part of it.

Kashmir has been the main subject of the conflicts between India and Pakistan since Britain, the colonial power, partitioned India and carved out these two states with the collaboration of the Hindu and Muslim bourgeoisie in 1947. Two-thirds of Kashmir is ruled by India, while the remaining one-third is known as the Pakistan Province of Kashmir. While Pakistan calls Kashmir a "disputed area," India maintains that Kashmir is an integral part of India.

Having trenchantly opposed international involvement in the Kashmir issue in the past, the Indian government is today actively working with the US. For its part, the US, having sided with Pakistan during most of the Cold War, is pursuing definite economic, geo-political and strategic interests in the region.

The US now sees India, once an ally of the Soviet Stalinist regime, as its major partner in the region, considering its strategic importance, large market and wealth of resources. At the same time, the US does not want the disruption and volatility of a war between India and Pakistan. If the US could get a foothold in Kashmir as part of a settlement, the territory would be a springboard for the US into nearby Central Asia, where untapped oil and gas reservoirs are at stake.

The European and Japanese powers also have a keen eye on the situation. This July's annual G-8 summit in Japan issued a statement urging India and Pakistan "to resume dialogue as soon as possible in the spirit of the Lahore declaration in order to realise a sustainable peace in the region". The resolution added that, "the level of tension between India and Pakistan remains a cause of international concern". The Lahore declaration, signed by Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif, emphasised the need for talks between the two countries to settle bilateral disputes.



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