

India declares unilateral ceasefire

A renewed diplomatic push for negotiations over Kashmir

Sarath Kumara
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Moves are once again being made to initiate talks to end the armed conflict in Kashmir and find a settlement to the disputes that have triggered two of the three wars between Pakistan and India since independence in 1947.

On November 19, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee announced that Indian troops would halt all offensive actions against Kashmiri separatist groups in the state of Jammu and Kashmir during the Islamic month of Ramadan. While the military would remain on “full alert against any attack,” it would suspend combat operations as of November 28.

Pakistan cautiously welcomed the move and, responding to mounting international pressure, announced on December 2 that its armed forces would exercise “maximum restraint” along the Line of Control that separates Jammu and Kashmir from Pakistan-controlled Azad Kashmir. Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf called for tri-partite talks between the two countries and Kashmiri groups, and offered to fly to New Delhi on 24-hours notice to meet with Vajpayee if an invitation was forthcoming.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Abdus Sattar hinted in a statement to the *Times of India* on November 24 that Islamabad might be prepared to accept a greater status for the Line of Control. He said his government was prepared to stand by the July 4, 1999 statement signed by the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and US President Bill Clinton, which commits Pakistan to respect the sanctity of the Line of Control. Previously Pakistan has insisted that Kashmir's future be decided by a referendum in both the Pakistani- and Indian- controlled parts, as laid down in a 1948-49 UN resolution.

But the tentative nature of the process was underscored when India ruled out any tri-partite talks. Indian external affairs spokesman Raminder Singh commented last week that, while India was ready to negotiate with all groups in Kashmir, there was no role for Pakistan. India has always insisted that Kashmir is an internal matter and has repeatedly opposed any Pakistani or international involvement.

Attempts earlier this year to start negotiations floundered on the same issue. Hizbul Mujahideen, the largest armed Kashmiri separatist organisation, declared a unilateral three-month ceasefire in July. Unprecedented talks between representatives of the group and the Indian government took place in the Kashmiri capital of Srinagar but rapidly broke down when the Indian government rejected Hizbul's demands for Pakistan to be included in any negotiations over a permanent solution.

Hardline Kashmiri groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba have denounced the latest Indian ceasefire, criticised the Pakistani offer of restraint, and called for an intensification of the “jihad” or holy war against Indian forces. At least 35 people have died since November 28 in separatist attacks on both military and civilian targets. The worst incidents took place within days of

India's initial announcement—five Hindu and Sikh truck drivers died in the first on November 22, and five Hindu bus passengers in the second.

But Vajpayee insisted in parliament that while the government had taken a risk, “there is no going back on the ceasefire”. The Indian government is clearly calculating that its initiative will enable it to open up and take advantage of divisions within the ranks of the Kashmiri armed groups and political parties committed to separatism. All of them exploit the widespread hostility in Jammu and Kashmir to India's repressive rule of the state but substantial differences exist over political objectives: some accept local autonomy as part of India, some demand an independent Kashmir and others seek a merger with Pakistan.

The All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC)—an umbrella organisation of the separatist parties and groups based in Kashmir—supported India's ceasefire announcement and called for negotiations. APHC leaders say they should be allowed to initiate talks with the Indian and Pakistani governments, and with other separatist groups who oppose any talks, in order to make the “political process meaningful and result-oriented”.

The APHC has been seeking a compromise with the Indian government for some time. The Indian bi-weekly journal *Frontline* reported: “One of [APHC leader Abdul Gani] Lone's closest associates told *Frontline*, on condition of anonymity, that the least the Hurriyat could accept would be the grant of quasi-independent status to the Kashmir Valley.” But any settlement would have to go beyond the autonomy proposals announced in June by the present National Conference-led state government headed by Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah.

The APHC leaders have called on the Indian government to allow them to travel to Pakistan for talks with the military regime and with armed separatist groups that are based there. While it has not agreed to such a visit, New Delhi has allowed Lone to attend his son's marriage to the daughter of the separatist Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) chairman Amanullah Khan in Pakistani-administered Kashmir. The Indian government also gave permission to two APHC leaders, Mirwaiz Farooq and Moulvi Ansari, to participate in the OIC (Organisation for Islamic Countries) summit in Qatar.

There are indications that divisions exist in Hizbul Mujahideen over possible negotiations with the Indian government. According to the Indian press, Hizbul leader Syed Salahuddin had said before the Indian ceasefire announcement that Hizbul should reciprocate any offer of meaningful dialogue. But under pressure from the Islamabad-based Muttahida Jihad Council, the group rejected the ceasefire when it was announced, only to soften its position in early December. The Hizbul leader said the organisation “had not outrightly rejected the ceasefire” but was “weighing options before taking any final decision”.

Just as the Pakistani regime is under pressure from Islamic extremist groups to make no concessions to India, so the Indian government led by

the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is based on Hindu fundamentalism, faces opposition from Hindu chauvinist organisations. After Kashmiri separatists attacked and killed truck drivers on November 22, 15 parliamentarians belonging to Shiv Sena—a Hindu extremist grouping and a partner in the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA)—staged a parliamentary walkout in protest against the ceasefire.

About 150 Shiv Sena supporters later held a demonstration and burnt an effigy of Vajpayee, accusing him of selling out to the Islamic groups. At this stage Shiv Sena has kept its protests muted and is remaining in the ruling coalition, in which it has three cabinet posts. Minister of Heavy Industry Manohar Joshi said his party would “not pursue the matter any further”.

Substantial sections of the Indian ruling class are, however, backing the ceasefire. All the other major parties in the NDA coalition have expressed their support, along with the opposition parties—Congress and Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M). According to *Frontline*, CPI(M) parliamentarian Mohammad Yusuf Tarigami first floated the idea of a unilateral halt to fighting and “sources say he was a key figure in subsequent discussions on the issue”. The idea was backed by the Chief of the Army Staff General S. Padmanabhan and was reluctantly approved by Home Minister L.K. Advani—one of the BJP’s Hindu fundamentalist hardliners.

Both India and Pakistan have been under pressure from the US and European powers to settle the Kashmir conflict. As soon as India announced the ceasefire, Washington began to pressure Islamabad and the Kashmiri groups to reciprocate. US Assistant Secretary of State Karl Inderfurth has recently visited the subcontinent and held talks in New Delhi and also Colombo, where the US is applying pressure to the Sri Lankan government to reach a deal with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to end that country’s long-running civil war.

The Indian ceasefire has been welcomed by the major European powers. Britain’s junior foreign minister Peter Hain, who also visited India and Sri Lanka last month, said London would exert its influence on Pakistan. France, which has been trying to develop a closer relationship with Pakistan, supported the Indian move after a noticeable delay. The leader of a visiting European Union (EU) delegation to Pakistan, Dominique Girard, said EU is in favor of a negotiated settlement.

The diplomatic push for a resolution to the conflicts in Kashmir and Sri Lanka reflects the heightened interest by the major powers in South Asia following the end of the Cold War. The US signalled a shift away from its former Cold War ally Pakistan in July 1999 when it pressured Islamabad to withdraw Kashmiri separatists from the Kargil region of Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir. Earlier this year US President Clinton visited the subcontinent, spending the bulk of his time in discussions in India and stopping off only briefly in Pakistan. Since Clinton’s visit, other international leaders, including Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin, have toured India.

The focus on India is a product of its growing economic importance as an arena for trade and investment, including in the hi-tech computer and software industries. New Delhi is also seen as a possible strategic ally in a region, which as well as being significant in its own right adjoins both the Middle East and Central Asia where the major powers are jockeying for control of oil and mineral resources. The ongoing conflicts in Sri Lanka and particularly Kashmir, which has the potential to trigger another war between nuclear-armed Pakistan and India, both threaten the stability of the region.

While, in deference to India’s opposition to international involvement, the US administration has not officially been involved in the drive for talks on Kashmir, Washington has been closely engaged behind-the-scenes. US businessman, Mansoor Ijaz, has been one of the key go-betweens. He is a member of the US Council on Foreign Relations, chairman of the New York-based Crescent Investment management and is

reportedly personally close to Clinton. He is also the leader of the Kashmir Study Group, consisting of US Congressmen and former diplomats, which has been formulating options for US policy on Kashmir.

In an editorial in the *International Herald Tribune* on November 22, Ijaz outlined his involvement in talks with top officials and political figures in Jammu and Kashmir and New Delhi in June—just weeks before the Hizbul Mujahideen announced its unilateral ceasefire in July. He said that during his visit he had spoken to both Vajpayee and Pakistani leader General Musharraf about a possible framework for negotiations that had Clinton’s backing. He also explained that he had delivered a letter from the Hizbul chief Salahuddin to Clinton asking for verification that the plan had US backing.

Ijaz gave the keynote speech at a recent symposium held near Delhi entitled “Next Steps in Jammu and Kashmir: Give Peace a Chance.” The meeting was organised by the Delhi-based Peace Initiatives organisation in conjunction with Lord Eric Avebury, head of Amnesty International and a prominent member of the House of Lords in Britain.

The high-powered symposium brought together a number of key leaders from various Kashmiri groups, including the JKLF Jammu and Kashmir chairman Yasin Malik, the son of the prime minister of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, Sardar Attique Ahmad Dhan, and the chief executive councillor of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Thaupstan Chaewang.

The US has undoubtedly been exerting pressure through other means as well. Since the military seized power last year Pakistan has been isolated diplomatically and its economy has been teetering on the brink of collapse. A much-delayed International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan \$US596 million which Islamabad desperately needed to shore up the country’s finances, finally came through in late November, just days before Pakistan announced its own policy of “maximum restraint” along the Line of Control.

The conflict in Jammu and Kashmir between the Indian military and armed Kashmiri separatist groups that began in 1989 has had devastating consequences. More than 30,000 people have died and many more have been injured or left homeless. India has over half a million troops stationed in Kashmir directed both against the Pakistani army and the insurgents. According to international human rights groups, the Indian security forces have carried out widespread detention without trial, torture and extra-judicial killings in a bid to terrorise the local population and stamp out sympathy for the separatist groups.

The fighting is also costly for both the Indian and Pakistani governments. *Jane’s Security News* indicates: “The approximate annual cost of defending Kashmir [for India] is over 54.75 billion rupees (\$US1.24 billion).” The 11 weeks of fighting in the Kargil heights area in 1999 cost India an estimated \$450 million. According to India, Pakistan spends \$110 million a year in funding, arming and training separatist guerilla groups operating in Kashmir—an allegation Pakistan denies.

While considerable international influence is being brought to bear, the outcome of the present diplomatic process is highly uncertain. The origins of the Kashmir dispute are deeply embedded in the partition of the subcontinent along communal lines in 1947 following the end of British colonial rule. Kashmir, one of India’s princely states, was controlled by a Hindu maharaja but the majority of its population was Muslim. The maharaja initially attempted to proclaim independence, but when Pakistan fomented a rebellion, he acceded to union with India, leaving the state divided between the two countries.

Far from the tensions over Kashmir having lessened over the last half century, the political establishment in both India and Pakistan have increasingly resorted to religious fundamentalism, thus exacerbating the conflict and the dangers of war. More than 50 years after independence, Kashmir is a constant reminder of the reactionary character of the partition and the inability of the ruling classes throughout the subcontinent to

resolve in a progressive fashion any of the region's outstanding political and social problems.



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