

India-Bangladesh border still tense after worst clash in 30 years

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The India-Bangladesh border remains tense following a major clash between the armed forces of the two countries in mid-April that claimed the lives of 19 soldiers. While the immediate cause is an outstanding dispute over territory, the incidents have fueled nationalist sentiments in both countries—particularly in Bangladesh, where the government and opposition have exploited the issue in the lead up to elections due in July.

The April 16-19 fighting was the worst since the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. It took place around the village of Padua (known as Pyrdiwah in India), which adjoins the Indian state of Meghalaya and the Tibil area of the Bangladesh border in the Sylhet district. In that area, 6.5 kilometres of the border have remained in dispute for the past 30 years.

The trigger for the clash appears to have been an attempt by Indian forces to construct a footpath from an army outpost in Padua across a disputed territory some 300 metres wide to Indian Meghalaya. According to a Bangladesh Rifles spokesman, when the Indian Border Security Force refused to withdraw, the Bangladeshi military attacked and restored the country's "territory and sovereignty".

In three days of fighting, both sides used rockets, mortars and heavy machine guns, resulting in the deaths of 16 Indian soldiers and three Bangladeshis. As a result of the clash, an estimated 10,000 Bangladeshis and 1,000 Indians were forced to flee the area.

In Bangladesh, the media stoked up fears of Indian retaliation. The *Independent* reported that Indian troops were digging thousands of trenches along northeastern border and "massing troops." A May 9 article in the *Daily Star* claimed that Indian security forces had sounded "a red alert" along 100-kilometre stretch of the border and were cracking down on villagers crossing

into India. On May 11, the same paper reported villagers complaining of Indian troops creating panic by engaging in night operations.

The Indian press seized on claims that the Bangladeshi soldiers had mutilated the corpses of the Indian troops killed in the clash. Speculation was further fueled when the Indian military failed to hand over the bodies to the relatives of the soldiers.

New Delhi and Dhaka have, initially at least, defused the issue. The Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina telephoned her Indian counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee on May 22 to express "regret" over deaths of the Indian soldiers. The previous day, the Bangladeshi Rifles withdrew from Padua village to restore the status quo.

At the same time, however, Hasina used the incident at home to strengthen her position against the opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP) by claiming that the military's actions demonstrated her willingness to stand up to India. The rightwing BNP, which is allied to a number of Islamic fundamentalist parties, has consistently accused the government of "subservience to India". She ruled out any visit to New Delhi to meet with Vajpayee.

Bangladesh has been in political turmoil for months after a protracted series of strikes and protests by opposition parties demanding that the government resign and call early elections. The ruling party has countered with demonstrations and rallies of its own and the deployment of thousands of police and troops. Over two months, several people have been killed and hundreds wounded in clashes between opposition protestors and the security forces.

For its part, the BNP has seized on the border clash to demand even tougher action. BNP leader Khaleda Zia was quick to brand Hasina an Indian stooge. "You've

already seen that our independence and sovereignty isn't safe in their hands,” Zia told a public meeting in Sylhet. “We reassure you that if we come back to power we'll make sure that Padua belongs to us.”

A BNP statement signed by 106 opposition parliamentarians hailed the Bangladeshi military, saying “the patriotic people of the country were behind them for protecting every inch of our soil”. The leader of the Islamic fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami, Matiur Rahaman, insisted that “India should apologise to Bangladesh unconditionally”.

In comparison to its belligerent responses to incidents involving Pakistan, India has sought to downplay the fighting and the role of the Hasina government. While it is unlikely that the Bangladeshi troops would have gone into action without the approval of Hasina, the various theories circulating in India seek to pin the blame on someone else—military leaders sympathetic to the BNP or Pakistani military intelligence agents. The BNP has denied any involvement in the clash, noting that the government handpicked the head of the Bangladeshi military.

The Indian government clearly has a preference for maintaining Hasina in power over her anti-Indian rival, Zia. Bharat Karnat, a defence analyst at the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi, commented: “Considering the very moderate reaction of the Indian government, it seems, they don't want to spoil the chances of the present government.”

India also has more long-term interests at stake. New Delhi is seeking to gain easier access to its northeastern states via road and rail links through Bangladesh. The two governments have already signed an agreement providing for road transport. Indian big business also has an eye on substantial natural gas reserves in Bangladesh—both to invest in and also as a source of fuel.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the clash, the border dispute points to the unstable political relationship between the two countries and, more fundamentally, to the artificial and thoroughly reactionary character of the 1947 partition that divided the Indian subcontinent along communal lines.

The border between India and Pakistan was drawn up in just six weeks by the appointee of the British government Sir Cyril Radcliffe between the end of June and August 15, 1947. India's eastern border split

Bengal in two and created East Pakistan—today's Bangladesh. The intertwined Bengali territory, economy and people were separated into two parts on the basis of religion by pencilling in a line on the map. A number of areas remained in dispute.

In 1971, the East Pakistani masses revolted against the country's military junta based in West Pakistan. The Indian government of prime minister Indira Gandhi intervened militarily to support the establishment of an independent Bangladesh for two reasons—to weaken and divide India's rival, Pakistan, and also to ensure that the rebellion did not spill over into India's state of West Bengal. Nevertheless, border disputes remained, involving over 112 enclaves held by India and 32 by Bangladesh.

An agreement was signed between the two countries in 1974 establishing the borders and providing Indian access to transport across Bangladesh. Bangladesh ratified the deal but India did not. While the present Bangladeshi government claims to have reduced the disputed border from 200 kilometres to only 6.5 kilometres, the latest conflict confirms the explosive character of the region's communal divisions.



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