

Bomb attack in Kashmir heightens tensions between India and Pakistan

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A devastating attack on the state legislature building in Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir on October 1 has sharply raised tensions within the state and further strained relations between India and Pakistan, already heightened by the US-led war drive against Afghanistan.

According to the Indian media, several gunmen stole a government telecommunications vehicle, packed it with explosives and drove it through the security cordon surrounding the heavily guarded complex in Srinagar at around 2pm. The driver detonated the explosives and, in the commotion that followed, the others dressed in police uniforms rushed inside firing their weapons and setting off grenades. They barricaded themselves into the building and were killed after a seven-hour battle with Indian soldiers and police.

The death toll has steadily risen to 38 as more bodies have been recovered from the rubble. Those killed include members of the Indian security forces, legislature employees and a number of civilians. At least 75 more were injured in the blast and subsequent shootout—10 people are in hospital in a critical condition. Most of the state's legislators, who were likely targets, were not in the vicinity at the time, having just left a nearby temporary building. Some 150 buildings and stalls in the area were damaged by the blast.

The attack comes amid an escalation in fighting between Indian security forces and various armed Kashmiri separatist groups. At least 70 people lost their lives in a series of clashes just in the week prior to October 1. More than 30,000 people have died in the past 12 years of fighting over the status of Kashmir—a constant source of conflict between India and Pakistan since the partition of the subcontinent and independence from British colonial rule in 1947.

In a media statement released in Srinagar, the Islamic extremist organisation Jaish-e-Mohammad initially claimed responsibility for the latest attack and named those involved. The group was established by Massood Azhar, one of three Kashmiri militants released by the Indian government in a deal struck to end the hijacking of an Indian airlines plane to Afghanistan in late 1999. Through a spokesman in Pakistan, however, the organisation has since attempted to distance itself from any involvement.

US preparations for a military strike against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan have inflamed the political situation in Kashmir. A number of Kashmiri separatist groups have links with the Taliban and Islamic fundamentalist organisations in Pakistan, and are stridently opposed to the support being given by Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf to the US military.

Jaish-e-Mohammad along with Lashkar-e-Toiba, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen and other Islamic fundamentalists organised a strike in Jammu and Kashmir on September 21 in support of protests inside

Pakistan against Musharraf. Protesters in Srinagar burned US flags and chanted slogans in support of the Taliban. The Al Umar Mujahideen group issued a statement calling for “the Muslim world to unite and fight against America” in the event of any US attack on Afghanistan.

The strike brought to the surface deep rifts within Kashmiri organisations. The leadership of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) called on the residents of Jammu and Kashmir not to support the protest and expressed its unanimous support for Musharraf's “realist, bold and forthright stand”. APHC chairman Abdul Ghani Bhat had previously condemned the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

As well as being aimed against Indian rule in Jammu and Kashmir, this week's bomb attack on the state legislature appears to be directed against Kashmiri organisations such as the APHC that in the past have advocated negotiation with New Delhi over the political status of Kashmir and have now backed Musharraf's stance. Following Bhat's opposition to the September 21 strike, a coalition of Islamic groups warned him “to get ready to pay a heavy price.”

Tensions have also been fanned by the communalist actions of the Indian government—a coalition led by the Hindu fundamentalist Bharathya Janatha Party (BJP)—which last week banned the Islamic Students Movement of India (SIMI) and launched a nationwide police crackdown. At least 240 SIMI activists have been arrested, including its president Shahid Badr. In Uttar Pradesh, police killed four people when they opened fire on protesters opposing the ban.

The government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee accused SIMI of “inciting communalism” and having connections with the Al-Qaeda group of Osama bin Laden but has provided no evidence. Indian opposition parties including the Congress Party, the Samjwadi Party and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) immediately criticised the ban as a ploy to polarise Hindu voters and bolster the BJP's support in upcoming state elections. In Kashmir, APHC leader Syed Ali Geelani denounced the charges against SIMI as “baseless”.

Whether Jaish-e-Mohammad was responsible or not, this week's bomb blast in Srinagar has certainly been a boon for Vajpayee. As well as imposing tougher security measures in Jammu and Kashmir, the Indian government has seized on the attack to denounce Pakistan's support for Kashmiri separatists and press the US to brand its rival as “a terrorist-supporting nation”.

New Delhi has been desperately seeking to regain ground in Washington after the Bush administration abruptly shifted its stance towards Pakistan following the September 11 attacks on the US. Over the last three years, the US has been discernibly shifting support away from its Cold War ally, Pakistan, and establishing a closer strategic

and economic relationship with India—moves that have been welcomed with open arms by the Vajpayee government. In the space of just a few weeks, however, Washington has dropped its criticisms of the military junta in Pakistan and provided the country with desperately needed economic aid in exchange for Musharraf's support for the US war drive against Afghanistan—effectively passing over India's offer of a partnership to fight Islamic extremism.

In Indian ruling circles, concerns have been raised over the implications of the US shift towards Islamabad. New Delhi issued a statement welcoming the recent US decision to freeze the assets of groups alleged to have links to bin Laden, including the Kashmiri organisation Harkat-ul-Mujaheddin, but called for further initiatives. "We hope that we will see more such organisations being targeted as the US spreads the web wider with such groups that are known to indulge in terrorist activities and have huge financial networks," a spokesperson said.

India has bluntly accused Pakistan of being responsible for the Srinagar blast and demanded that it take action to curb the activities of Kashmiri separatist groups on its soil. The Indian External Affairs Ministry issued a statement on October 1, insisting that Pakistan "continues to be a country that aids, abets and sponsors terrorism and terrorist networks." It then warned: "At a time when the democratic world has formed a broad and determined coalition against international terrorism, India cannot accept such manifestations of hate and terror from across its borders."

Two top Indian ministers—National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra and External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh—have been in Washington over the past week seeking reassurances from the Bush administration that it still wants close relations with New Delhi and pressing for further US action against Kashmiri separatist groups as part of its "war against terrorism".

In an extraordinary letter, hand-delivered to Bush by Singh on October 1, Vajpayee issued a thinly-veiled threat of retaliation against Pakistan. Referring to the US preparations for military strikes against Afghanistan, the Indian Prime Minister indicated that he understood Washington's "core responsibility" for security of the American people. He then added: "There has been understandable anger in the country at this wanton act of violence. Incidents of this kind raise questions for our security which, as a democratically elected leader of India, I have to address in our supreme national interest. Pakistan must understand that there is a limit to the patience of the people of India."

India's Home Minister L K Advani, a hardline Hindu extremist, has gone one step further. On October 2, he again branded Pakistan as "a terrorist country" and then insisted "if it wants to prove its seriousness in this regard [fighting terrorism]... It should hand over Jaish-e-Mohammad leaders to India". The parallel with the US demand for the Taliban to hand over bin Laden and his followers is unmistakable, as are the implications—if Pakistan fails to do so, India will respond militarily. Advani also reiterated India's demand that the US should not just concentrate on Afghanistan, but should take action against all terrorist camps, outfits and countries who have been harbouring terrorists.

India's junior foreign minister Omar Abdullah told the BBC's Question Time India yesterday that India should send its forces into Pakistan to destroy "terrorist training camps". "It does not have to be [done] overtly," he said. "You can do it covertly and destroy these camps because otherwise bleeding by a thousand cuts is really not the way to go about it." The junior home minister I D Swami reinforced the message, saying: "Striking terrorist camps in PoK [Pakistan-

occupied Kashmir] has always been a possibility."

The Bush administration has condemned the Srinagar attack and offered reassurances to India, in general terms, that its "war against terrorism" is not "unidirectional" and will include targets other than Afghanistan in the future. The Indian media has made much of the fact that Bush dropped in during a meeting between Singh and US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice at the White House and held informal talks with the Indian foreign minister. But concerned over the ramifications for the already shaky Pakistani regime, the US has offered New Delhi nothing tangible.

For its part, Pakistan has condemned the attack in Srinagar and denied any involvement. A Pakistani foreign ministry statement said that the attack was "especially reprehensible as it appears to be aimed at maligning the legitimate struggle of the Kashmiri people for their right to self-determination." Other top Pakistani officials have openly accused India of organising the attack as a means of enlisting US support against Kashmiri groups.

Musharraf, however, is walking a very fine line. With the support of the military high command and Islamic parties, he ousted Nawaz Sharif in 1999 after the former Pakistani prime minister caved in to US demands to rein in Kashmiri separatist fighters in the Kargil area of Jammu and Kashmir. Now he is facing growing protests inside Pakistan over his support for the US military preparations against the Taliban.

After the US froze the financial assets of Harkat-ul-Mujaheddin, Pakistan was obliged to close the organisation's offices. If Musharraf is forced to take any further action against Kashmiri groups, he could easily face the same political fate as his predecessor.

The events of the last week indicate that Kashmir, which has been the trigger for two wars between India and Pakistan over the last half century, is already a tinderbox. Any US military action against Afghanistan will have immediate political repercussions inside Kashmir, which in turn poses the danger of open conflict between the two nuclear-armed rivals on the Indian subcontinent.



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