

India rules out troop withdrawal from Pakistani border

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Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee grandly told the press in Lucknow last Friday: “There is no possibility of war with Pakistan.” The comment, however, flies in the face of an announcement just days before by his Defence Minister George Fernandes that the top-level Cabinet Committee on Security had decided to maintain Indian troops on the Pakistan border until October at least. Fernandes said there would be no scaling down of the preparedness of the forces.

As a result, around a million heavily-armed Indian and Pakistani troops continue to confront each other along the border in a high state of alert. While the prospects of an immediate outbreak of all-out war may have lessened a fraction in the past fortnight because of international pressure, either side could seize upon any incident to rapidly escalate tensions between the two nuclear-armed powers.

Vajpayee’s remarks would not have reassured villagers in border areas, who endure the daily artillery and mortar exchanges or have fled their homes altogether. According to Pakistani officials, seven people were injured last Saturday by an Indian barrage that hit a remote settlement in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir some 80km north of the city of Muzaffarabad. Another Pakistani was injured and three homes damaged during Indian shelling on the Lipa Valley.

Although Indian and Pakistani officials say the level of shelling has reduced somewhat, sporadic exchanges continue along the Line of Control (LoC) dividing the Indian- and Pakistani-held regions of disputed Kashmir. According to the Indian Defence Ministry, more than 1,000 rounds are fired from small arms, mortars and artillery every day. Official estimates put the number of civilians and soldiers killed on both sides at nearly 150 since mid-May when an attack by Kashmiri separatists

on an Indian army base threatened to precipitate military conflict.

Few of the estimated 150,000 people who fled their homes along the border have returned. Pritam Singh told the press: “I am not sure we will survive if we were forced to go back.” A 60-year-old villager Shanti Devi said: “I know we face malnutrition and other discomforts in the [refugee] camps but we are not ready to return to our homes unless we are sure that the Pakistani guns have fallen silent for good.”

While ruling out war, for the present at least, Vajpayee told reporters in Lucknow he had little faith in promises made by Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf to halt infiltration by Islamic extremist militia into Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir. “The US has told us that the General has assured them he would stop that permanently... But it is difficult to rely on him.” Vajpayee rejected the suggestion of talks with the Pakistan President.

New Delhi is also maintaining pressure on Islamabad by strengthening its military forces. Last Saturday India responded to a series of Pakistani missile tests last month with one of its own—the test firing of a Russian-made “Smerch” rocket, which has a range of 90km and can strike both air and land targets. On the same day, Defence Secretary Yogendra Narain announced that India was dramatically increasing its spending on military purchases by 33 percent and shopping for a range of new equipment, including radar, specialised missiles, airborne surveillance devices, and night vision equipment.

An estimated 60,000 people have died in the decade-long guerrilla war between Indian security forces and Islamic militia groups opposed to Indian rule in Kashmir. New Delhi accuses the Pakistani military of directly arming, training and controlling the “cross-

border terrorists”. Islamabad points to the lack of democratic rights for Kashmir’s Muslim majority and insists that it provides only moral and political support to what it terms “freedom fighters”.

Under pressure from the Bush administration, Musharraf has promised to halt all “terrorist activity” from Pakistan-controlled territory—a concession that has been widely denounced by Islamic fundamentalist groups in Pakistan. Several groups have insisted that they will ignore any ban and continue to carry out attacks on Indian security forces in Kashmir. Any such actions will be seized upon by the Indian government, led by Vajpayee’s Hindu chauvinist Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP), as a sign of bad faith, providing the pretext for a new series of demands.

The Indian generals already claim that Musharraf has failed to halt the infiltration of “cross border terrorists”. Last weekend the Indian army claimed to have killed three suspected militants after they crossed into Indian territory—the first since Musharraf promised to halt infiltration. Brigadier Mahesh Eranna, chief commander on the Line of Control, accused the Pakistani military of directly assisting the guerrillas, declaring: “The infiltrators could have never managed to come close to the LoC and cross it without the assistance of Pakistani troops across Poonch and Mendhar.”

A number of clashes have occurred inside Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir over the past week. Indian police claimed on Wednesday to have killed nine Kashmiri separatists in a series of separate gunfights. Few details were made available as to who initiated the shootouts. Over the weekend, the army raided a house in the village of Angan Patri and shot dead two alleged guerrillas.

Indian police also cracked down on a protest in Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir, organised by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), an officially-permitted coalition of groups opposed to Indian rule. The demonstration was in protest against statements by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—a Hindu extremist organisation closely connected to Vajpayee’s BJP—calling for the carve-up of Jammu and Kashmir on a communal basis. Police arrested the protest leader, JKLF Vice Chairman Javid Mir.

Both Musharraf and Vajpayee preside over unstable

administrations that are wracked by political and economic problems and that are beholden to communal extremist groups. The two governments have a vested interest in maintaining a belligerent stance over disputed Kashmir, which has sparked two of the three wars between the two countries since 1947.

This highly volatile situation led the US Ambassador to India, Robert Blackwill, to observe last Friday: The tensions have certainly eased in the last few weeks... but the situation still remains dangerous. Even though the crisis has subsided to some degree, the structural elements that caused it are still in place.”

It should be added that the Bush administration while urging restraint, publicly at least, to suit its own immediate interests and purposes in the region, has been the key factor in exacerbating the tensions. Bush’s “global war on terrorism” and Washington’s developing military and strategic ties with New Delhi have only encouraged Vajpayee’s government to take a more aggressive stance against India’s long-time rival Pakistan.



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