

Brutal killing in Kashmir threatens to raise India-Pakistan tensions

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An attack on July 13 on a predominantly Hindu slum in Jammu, the winter capital of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, has underscored the ongoing tensions between India and Pakistan. While the incident has not resulted in any immediate military threats from New Delhi, the region remains a powderkeg. More than a million Pakistani and Indian troops still confront each other along the border since last December when Kashmiri separatists attacked the Indian parliament building in New Delhi.

At least 28 people were killed in the attack and many more were injured. According to eyewitnesses, eight gunmen, some dressed as Hindu priests, threw grenades and opened fire with automatic rifles on the workers who were listening to the cricket match on a battery-powered radio. The attackers then barged into the nearby huts shooting indiscriminately before fleeing into nearby forests.

Babloo, a 17-year-old balloon vendor, told the BBC: “We were following the match when there was the boom. Everyone thought there was bomb explosion and rushed there.” He suffered two bullet wounds to the leg. Most of the victims were women and children. One woman exclaimed: “Why did they kill my granddaughters? How had they harmed the militants in any way?”

No organisation has claimed responsibility for the attack. Various Islamic extremist groups opposed to Indian rule of Kashmir have carried out arbitrary, sectarian attacks against non-Muslims in the past. It is most likely that one of them organised the July 13 massacre. But it cannot be ruled out that Hindu extremists, including those with connections to the Indian security forces, authored the attack. Communal fanatics from both sides have a vested interest to heightening tensions over Kashmir.

Whoever was responsible, the attack, which was aimed at inciting communal hatred, was profoundly reactionary in character. All the victims were seasonal migrant workers from poor areas of India who were camped in tents and shanties on a garbage dump on the outskirts of Jammu. As one journalist explained, they were “the poor of the poor.”

Hindu extremist organisations immediately seized on the

incident to agitate for tougher security measures to “defend Hindus” in Kashmir. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and other Hindu chauvinist groups organised a bandh—a general strike combined with business closures—in Jammu town and other areas to protest against the attack. According to press reports, the demonstration was dominated by anti-Pakistan and anti-government slogans.

India’s Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister L.K. Advani visited the area last weekend along with the state’s Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister, Farooq Abdullah, and his son, India’s Minister of State for External Affairs, Omar Abdullah. Confronted with angry crowds, shouting “Why have you come now—to seek Hindu votes,” Advani promised that “adequate measures would be taken for security”.

The incident will also be used by Indian security forces to bolster repressive measures, which are directed against the state’s Muslim majority and have played a major role in fuelling the conflict in Kashmir. International human rights organisations have in the past accused the Indian military and police of widespread abuse of democratic rights, including detention with out trial, torture and extra-judicial killings. Under the sweeping new powers of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), the police have detained 96 people across the state over the last month.

Following the attack in the Indian parliament in December and again after Kashmiri separatist fighters raided an Indian army camp in May, the Indian government threatened military reprisals against Pakistan. New Delhi blames Islamabad for organising what it terms “cross-border terrorism” and insists that Pakistan’s military strongman General Pervez Musharraf has to stop the infiltration of armed Islamic militants into Jammu and Kashmir.

The initial response of the Indian government to the latest attack was relatively low key. During his visit to Jammu, Advani, who has a long history as a Hindu fanatic, avoided directly blaming Pakistan for the massacre. Asked about Pakistan’s involvement, he simply said: “At the moment, I cannot comment and I am collecting information.”

After an emergency meeting of the Cabinet Committee on

Security presided over by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, Foreign Minister Yaswant Sinha declared: “It is clear that all this is being carried out with the inspiration of Pakistan. It was gruesome attack.” As a number of commentators pointed out, however, “with the inspiration of Pakistan” is not the same as directly blaming Pakistan for organising the attack. After 50 years of debate and conflict over Kashmir, such fine shades of meaning are significant.

The apparently mild response in New Delhi, at least at present, is purely tactical. Both British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and US Secretary for State Colin Powell are due to arrive on the Indian subcontinent in the next week or so for talks in New Delhi and Islamabad.

For its own immediate purposes, Washington has urged the Vajpayee government to refrain from any military action. Having enlisted Islamabad’s support for the US invasion of Afghanistan, the Bush administration has exploited its “war against terrorism” to build up a significant military, police and intelligence presence in Pakistan that would be placed in jeopardy in any war with India.

Powell condemned the latest attack in Kashmir, saying its aim was to “undermine efforts to ease tensions in the region,” but did not blame Pakistan. At the same time, the US sought to mollify the Vajpayee government by promising to pressure Islamabad to curb Kashmiri separatist groups. US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher commented: “We are continuing to look for ways to continue the momentum [of stopping] infiltration so that the Pakistanis carry out the pledge to make that permanent and to eliminate camps and things like that.”

In a comment on July 16, the *Times of India* pointed to the pressure on New Delhi: “The government’s caution is evidence of the difficult situation it finds itself in. The international community has started putting pressure on India to take further steps to de-escalate and begin a dialogue with Pakistan.”

The Vajpayee government, however, immediately came under fire from opposition parties and also from among its Hindu chauvinist allies. RSS leader K.S. Sudarshan stated: “The RSS would like to express its strongest exasperation over the repeated failure of the government, both at the centre as well as the state, in protecting the lives of the people of Jammu.”

The opposition parties attacked the Vajpayee government from the right, insisting that its response to “terrorism” was inadequate. During a parliamentary debate on Tuesday, Congress Party leader Sonia Gandhi demanded that the government take tough measures to “fight terrorism”. Her deputy Shivraj Patil accused Vajpayee of lacking “a policy, a vision and determination” for fighting terrorism, and of relying too heavily on the US. The CPI-M chimed in on the

same note, calling for effective measures to check terrorist activity. After offering to collaborate with the government to curb terrorism, opposition MPs staged a protest walkout.

Advani responded to the criticisms by renewing his attacks on Pakistan. He said that, in discussions with a US official, he had repeated India’s demand for Washington to place Pakistan on its list of terrorist-sponsoring countries. “If the US wants,” he said, “it can stop terrorism and put an end to terrorist sponsoring infrastructure in Pakistan by threatening that Washington would declare it a terrorist state.” But neither Advani nor other ministers made any direct threat of Indian military reprisal.

While Vajpayee and Advani may be willing to toe the US line at present, in return for developing military and economic ties with the US, the unstable character of the Indian government makes it highly sensitive to charges from the Hindu extremists and the opposition that it is failing to defend Hindus and India. In such circumstances any incident has the potential to rapidly propel the Vajpayee government into military conflict with Pakistan as a means of shoring up its own support at home.

There is no shortage of pretexts. Violent attacks continued in Jammu and Kashmir this week. On Tuesday, 14 people were wounded in a grenade attack in a crowded street in the town of Anantnag in Kashmir. The following day three people died and nine were injured in a bomb blast. According to conservative estimates, at least 60,000 people have died in the decade-long armed conflict for control of disputed Kashmir.



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