

Gujarat temple massacre inflames tensions between India and Pakistan

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A September 24 attack on a Hindu temple in the western Indian state of Gujarat, in which at least 42 people were killed, has inflamed communalist tensions and re-kindled the conflict between India and Pakistan. The two countries are continuing a military standoff over the disputed territory of Kashmir.

Two suspected Islamic gunmen, armed with AK-47 assault rifles and hand grenades, entered the 16-hectare Swaminarayan temple complex in the state capital Gandhinagar and started shooting indiscriminately and hurling grenades. Hundreds of people were in the temple at the time. Those confirmed dead included six women and four children, while more than 100 people were injured.

Vipul Soni, 15, who was at the temple at the time, told Reuters that the gunmen “barged into the temple and started firing ... I managed to run and somehow escaped.” Priti Nahata, 16, said: “I am fortunate to be alive.”

Muslims in Gujarat immediately fled to relief camps established during anti-Muslim pogroms in February. Madinaben, a Muslim woman, told a reporter: “We were afraid when we heard that terrorists had opened fire inside a Gandhinagar temple ... it was impossible for us to stay at home without fearing for our lives.” Having had her home razed in the February attacks, she fled with her three-year-old daughter.

Shiraj-ul-Haq, who runs a cycle repair shop, said: “I keep moving from my house to these camps. There is always a lurking fear. After spending five months in a relief camp, I had been home for two months when this happened. Now I am back here and don’t know when I’ll be able to head for home.”

No group has claimed responsibility for the assault. The Indian authorities claim to have recovered a letter from the dead assailants, which indicated they belonged to a group called Tehrik-e-Qassas (The Movement for Retribution).

An ~~India~~^{Indian}-based web ~~comment~~^{statement} the assailants did not appear to be Kashmiris. “In fact, even if they were locals, it won’t be such a surprise in Gujarat, which witnessed widespread communal violence this year. There are several young boys who saw their loved ones being killed and raped.” This was a reference to February’s pogroms instigated after a train was set alight at Godhra, allegedly by Muslims, killing 58 people, who were portrayed in the media as Hindu activists. The Gujarat government of Chief Minister Narendra Modi was implicated in the pogroms.

Whoever was responsible for the temple massacre, the atrocity has only played into the hands of Hindu extremists, as well as the Indian and Pakistani governments, both of which exploit religious chauvinism to divide the population and distract attention from the increasingly oppressive conditions facing the masses across the sub-continent.

Indian political leaders, including Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, his Deputy L.K. Advani and opposition Congress leader Sonia Gandhi, rushed to the temple, expressing sympathy for the victims and immediately blaming Pakistan, with Advani denouncing “enemies of the country”.

Rejecting these charges, the Pakistan Foreign Ministry condemned “highly irresponsible statements from some quarters accusing Pakistan of involvement in the terrorist attack”. But, for his part, Pakistan’s President Pervez Musharraf seized upon the murder of seven Christian charity workers in Karachi on September 25—the day after the Gujarat killings—to point an accusing finger at the Indian intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), without producing any evidence.

Leading the charge for the Indian government, Advani accused Musharraf of directly instigating the temple attack. Referring to Musharraf’s speech last month at the UN General Assembly, Advani said: “In fact there was a

speech a few days ago in which our enemy went to the United Nations and spoke of Gujarat. This indicates that they had planned this for some time. And this attack was to implement that plan.”

Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha announced that the attackers had been identified as Pakistani citizens and traced to either of two Pakistan-based groups, Jaish-e-Mohammed or Lashkar-e-Taiba. But he produced no evidence to substantiate his allegations. Supporters of Vajpayee’s Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) organised a demonstration in Delhi where they shouted: “Down with Pervez Musharraf, Stop killing of innocents, Down with Pakistan.”

Not to be outdone, the Congress Party, which falsely claims to stand for secularism, called for a bandh (a general shutdown and strike) in Gujarat against the killings. It openly appealed to Hindu fundamentalism, knowing full well that such actions could spark communal violence. The Congress leader in Gujarat, Sankarsingh Vaghela, who recently joined the party from the Hindu extremist Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), issued the call after consulting the national leadership in Delhi.

To outmanoeuvre Congress, the Hindu chauvinist Vishwa Hindu Parshad (World Hindu Council-VHP), whose leaders and members were accused of instigating the February violence, called an all-India bandh. Though the VHP claimed the bandh was a success, media reports indicated sparse support. *The Times of India* reported that the bandh succeeded in Mumbai (the capital of the western Indian state of Maharashtra) and Gujarat, “but the rest of the country showed little enthusiasm for it”. Isolated incidents of stabbing and the stoning of shops and vehicles were reported.

Bal Thackeray, the leader of Shiv Sena, a fascistic outfit, stepped up pressure on the government to attack Pakistan. “Vajpayee keeps repeating that we will not tolerate militancy,” he declared. “But there is no action to be seen.” Thackeray warned that Shiv Sena could quit the government.

Confronted by growing disaffection and a series of defeats in state elections over the past two years, key figures in Vajpayee’s BJP leadership, together with their allies in the VHP, Shiv Sena and the RSS, have been bent on inciting communalism and conflict with Pakistan. This has led to deepening social tensions and encouraged counter-attacks by Islamic fundamentalists and Kashmiri separatists.

However, while making accusations against Pakistan, Vajpayee and the Delhi leadership distanced themselves

from the VHP’s bandh call, and were anxious to curb immediate communal violence. Police and security forces were deployed in Gujarat, while police in Maharashtra made preventive arrests on the eve of the bandh. *The Indian Express* reported that Vajpayee warned Gujarat Chief Minister Modi not to allow a repeat of religious disturbances in the state.

As a lifelong member of the RSS, Vajpayee has no fundamental differences with Modi or other hawkish members of the BJP. His cautious attitude was a reaction to concerns expressed within the Indian establishment, as well as by the US government, in recent months.

Indian business leaders publicly opposed the bandh call. While condemning the temple attack, Confederation of Indian Industry director Chandrajit Banerjee said: “We strongly feel that such events should not be politicised, as bandhs are not the right form of response to an act of terrorism.” All India Association of Industries president Vijay Kalantri said the bandh would cost more than 10 billion rupees (about \$US200 million).

There are wider reservations in ruling circles with the BJP’s Hindu chauvinist agenda, which disrupts efforts to secure foreign investment and push through further economic restructuring. The Indian Supreme Court last month endorsed the Election Commission’s rejection of the BJP’s demand for early elections in Gujarat, which would have fanned communalism. The media generally denounced the BJP’s demand as well.

US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher issued a statement on the temple killings. “It’s imperative that violent groups ... in the region not be given an opportunity to achieve their goals,” he said, insisting that the US was promoting “dialogue as the means to resolve tensions and conflict in South Asia”.

For its own reasons, the Bush administration has applied pressure to India and Pakistan to back away from a war. It is concerned that a conflagration would affect its own drive to consolidate its grip over Afghanistan and strengthen its hand throughout Central and South Asia, not to speak of its planned invasion of Iraq. But by enlisting the support of both the Pakistani and Indian regimes for its aggression in Afghanistan, the US has only fueled regional tensions.



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