

New Delhi bomb blasts a heinous crime

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Last Saturday's serial bombings in the Indian capital of New Delhi were a heinous crime that can only strengthen reaction.

The bombings were aimed at inflicting maximum civilian casualties. They targeted three busy shopping areas—the market area of Paharganj near the Delhi railway station, Sarojini market in south Delhi, and Govindpuri, a wholesale trading center—as ordinary people were preparing for the most important religious festival in the Hindu calendar, *Diwali*, which this year fell on Tuesday, November 1.

At least 62 people were killed by the three bomb blasts. Scores of people remain hospitalised, some of them with life-threatening injuries. The number of dead would have been considerably higher had the conductor and driver of a Delhi municipal bus, alerted by passengers to a suspicious package, not thrown it from the bus just as it detonated.

The proximity of the bomb blasts to *Diwali* suggests that the bombers may have hoped to incite religious-communal strife between Hindus and the city's largely impoverished Muslim minority.

Indian authorities have blamed the attack on insurgents opposed to Indian rule over Jammu-Kashmir, a predominantly Muslim region whose Hindu Maharaja opted to join the newly created Dominion of India in 1947, shortly after the British, the Indian National Congress, and the Muslim League had partitioned the subcontinent along communal lines.

It is certainly possible that last Saturday's outrage was perpetrated by one of the many Kashmiri insurgent groups. The best armed of these groups espouse a reactionary Islamist ideology and have been implicated in communal-type attacks on civilians in Indian-held Kashmir.

But to date, Indian officials have presented no credible evidence pointing to the involvement of any Kashmiri insurgent group.

Islamic Inquilabi Mahaz (Islamic Revolutionary Movement)—a group referred to in press reports as either

little-known or previously unknown—is said to have taken responsibility for the bombings through a call placed Sunday to a news agency office in Kashmir.

Indian officials have been quick to draw a link between Islamic Inquilabi Mahaz and Lashkar-e-Toiba (Soldiers of God), a movement that is reputed to have carried out previous attacks in Delhi and at one-time enjoyed the patronage of Pakistani authorities.

But a spokesman for Lashkar-e-Toiba has vigorously denied any ties to Saturday's bombings, calling such charges “completely baseless and false” and asserting that the group does not target civilians, “especially women and children.”

It cannot be excluded that opponents of the Indian-Pakistani peace process from within India's military-intelligence establishment or the Hindu-supremacist right would mount a provocation with the aim of derailing the attempt of the Indian and Pakistani governments to arrive at a comprehensive settlement to their almost six-decade-long territorial and geo-political rivalry.

The day after the Delhi bombings, Indian and Pakistani officials agreed that on November 7 they will open five border crossings between Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir and Azad Kashmir—the part of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir that Pakistan seized in 1947-1948—to facilitate efforts to bring relief to victims of the October 8 earthquake. Although the UN, international relief agencies, and the Pakistani government have all warned of a mounting humanitarian crisis in Kashmir and parts of Pakistan's adjacent North West Frontier Province that has placed the lives of several million people at risk, it took several weeks of haggling between New Delhi and Islamabad before any loosening of the hitherto virtually iron-clad restrictions on contact across the Line of Control that separates Indian- and Pakistan-held Kashmir could be agreed upon.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's initial response to the bomb blast was measured, especially if compared with the reaction of the coalition that preceded the current Congress-led United Progressive Alliance. In

December 2001, when the Indian parliament complex was attacked, the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance almost immediately charged that Pakistan was responsible for the attack and ordered a massive troop mobilisation that brought the subcontinent to the brink of war.

Manmohan Singh's response, and in particular the decision to go forward with the agreement to facilitate cross-border relief in Kashmir, underscores the current government's support for normalising relations with Pakistan.

This does not mean, however, that the jockeying for advantage between the Indian and Pakistani bourgeoisies has ended, nor that the threat that their rivalry could spin out of control and into a conflagration has been lifted.

Indian government officials let it be known that when Pakistan's military strongman president, General Pervez Musharraf, telephoned Manmohan Singh Monday to offer Pakistan's support in tracking down the perpetrators of Saturday's bombing, Singh gave him a dressing down. The Indian Prime Minister is reported to have told Musharraf there are "indications" of "external linkages of terrorist groups"—i.e., foreign support for the Kashmir insurgency—and that "India expects Pakistan to act against terrorism against India." According to an account in the *Hindu*, Singh told Musharraf that "India could not be expected to demonstrate endless patience and tolerance in the face of continued provocation."

In other words, Saturday's bombing provided the Indian government with an opportunity to ratchet up pressure on Pakistan to curb the activities of the various Kashmiri insurgent groups that use Azad Karhmir as a base for their operations and that have enjoyed support from both ordinary Pakistanis and the Pakistani state. In resorting to this gambit, the Indian government is deliberately using the rhetoric of the Bush administration, for it knows that the US geo-political/intelligence establishment has come to view the Kashmir conflict as a breeding ground for Islamist terrorists and hopes Washington will further squeeze its close ally Musharraf.

Acutely conscious of India's rapidly growing economic and military lead over Pakistan strength and of the Bush administration's eagerness to develop India as a counterpoint to China, the Indian ruling elite calculates that it is well placed to drive a hard bargain with Islamabad in any peace settlement. Thus, even as it publicly deplores the slaughter of innocents on the streets of Delhi, it seeks to use the bombing outrage to advance its own predatory interests.

The Pakistani government, for its part, has expressed outrage over Manmohan Singh's comments, saying that there is no evidence of any foreign involvement in last Saturday's atrocity.

Within India, various big business and right-wing forces have seized on the bombings to promote communalism, anti-Pakistani chauvinism and further restrictions on democratic rights.

The Hindu-supremacist BJP said the bombings showed the urgent need to reconsider the government's "soft border" policy, a reference in part to the agreement to allow crossings of the Line of Control in Kashmir and more generally to closer relations with Pakistan. BJP General-Secretary Arun Jaitley said an insufficient mobilisation of security forces on the country's borders had facilitated illegal crossings of India's eastern and western borders, rendering "India a soft target and a soft state." He also denounced the Congress-led UPA for having repealed the BJP-led government's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA).

In an editorial titled "Securing India," the *Indian Express*, one of the country's most influential dailies, likewise called on the government to dispel the notion that India is a "soft state." It urged the UPA to emulate the actions of Britain's Tony Blair, whose government had sent out the message last summer "that there would be no compromising on national safety, whether at the political, social or legal level, even if it meant reversing some of the more liberal laws of entry, citizenship and prosecution."

The *Hindustan Times* is demanding an intensification of police surveillance and routine spot-checks of individuals going about their daily business: "[W]hile the country aspires to be a global power, no one ever demands a world-class police force.... There is no reason why the standard of policing cannot be of the kind that was visible, at least in parts of Delhi, on Sunday, the day after the blasts. Police personnel insisted on enforcing order by getting shopkeepers to pull down encroachments and checking vehicles and verifying the antecedents of some of the people around."



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