

Kashmir earthquake fails to advance India-Pakistan cooperation

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In the wake of the devastating earthquake in Kashmir on October 8, there was a flurry of speculation by political figures and the media in India and Pakistan, suggesting that the tragedy would enhance the “peace process” between the two countries.

Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf declared that the disaster could serve as “an opportunity of a lifetime” to end decades-old hostilities. Indian analyst C. Raja Mohan told the *Daily Times* that the quake offered a “chance for India [and] Pakistan to rebuild together”. India’s ambassador in Washington, Lalit Mansingh, declared that joint relief efforts could boost confidence and bring people together.

Nearly two months later, no significant move has been taken to “end decades of hostilities,” apart from the occasional pious statement from Islamabad or New Delhi. Kashmir has been the flashpoint for two of the three wars fought between India and Pakistan since 1947 and is an ideological touchstone for the communal politics repeatedly stirred up by the political establishment in both countries.

Ordinary working people on both sides of the border reacted to the catastrophe by expressing concern and offering assistance to its victims. After all, the earthquake did not respect boundaries, devastating Indian and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir as well as other parts of northern Pakistan. In many cases, villagers have family relations on the other side of the Line of Control (LoC) that divides Kashmir and have not been able to visit them for decades.

With every passing day, as new bodies are recovered, the scope of the disaster continues to grow. According to official Pakistani figures, 87,350 were killed by the quake. Independent estimates suggest the death toll could be well over 100,000. Another 1,350 deaths have been reported in India-administered Kashmir.

Estimates put the number of people affected at more than 3.5 million people. According to the UN, 1.5 million people have yet to receive adequate food and between 2.8 to 3.2 million people lack proper shelter. Diarrhea and other diseases have started to break out among refugees. With the

Himalayan winter closing in, aid workers have warned that many more people will die from cold, hunger and disease.

Despite the urgency, the Pakistani and Indian governments have been unable to agree on even basic steps to co-operate on aid and assistance. Many quake-stricken areas of Pakistani-controlled Kashmir are more readily accessible from Indian-controlled territory. Yet proposals to allow people and supplies across the LoC bogged down in weeks of bickering over the protocols to be observed.

The two countries agreed to open two crossing points on November 19 but on a very limited basis. Only 23 people crossed over into Pakistani Kashmir on that day. Two days later, seven more took clothes and gifts to relatives on the Pakistani side and yesterday nine more did the same.

Khair-ul-Nissa Shah, 62, told Associated Press that she was going to Pakistan to meet two sisters who left India 40 years ago. “There has been no news from them. It will be good to see my sisters,” she said. Ali Zaman, 60, a retired teacher said: “I am going to see my nieces in Balgran. I have to find out if they have survived”. These comments clearly reflect broader sentiments of people who want to be able to freely travel between the two zones.

To date, no Pakistanis have crossed into Indian Kashmir, although the Pakistani foreign ministry said yesterday that Indian authorities have given permission for 127 people. The delay reflects deep suspicion in both countries that any, even limited, measures will be exploited for military and strategic advantage.

On the Indian side, there have been accusations that “terrorist groups”—armed separatists opposed to India’s control of Jammu and Kashmir—will use the opportunity to “infiltrate” into India territory. The Indian media has published military claims that “terrorists” have built new “launching pads” near the LoC following the quake. Indian Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee flatly declared that the LoC would not be open for “anybody and everybody”.

Each side is extremely sensitive to any allegation that its actions have benefitted its rival. In the immediate aftermath of the quake, the media reported that a group of Indian

soldiers had crossed the LoC to assist their Pakistani counterparts trapped in a collapsed bunker. Within hours of the first reports, Pakistani army spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan told the BBC that the story was “a pure fabrication”. “All our bunkers are safe and built to withstand artillery shells,” he said.

Mutual distrust has blocked other forms of relief cooperation. Even though Pakistan lacked sufficient air transport to ferry supplies into inaccessible mountain villages hit by the quake, Islamabad turned down an Indian offer to provide aircraft. Pakistan refused to accept planes manned by Indian air force crews, while India refused to provide the aircraft without them.

Shireen Mazari, director of the Institute of Strategic Studies in Islamabad, told the *Financial Times* “[T]here are security issues. We do not want them [the Indian air force] surveying the lie of the land and assessing damage to [Pakistani] military assets.”

Mazari’s comments show that the overriding consideration for both New Delhi and Islamabad is not the fate of tens of thousands of people, but rather their own interests in Kashmir and the broader region. The token, temporary opening of two crossings on the LoC is simply part of the ongoing propaganda contest, as the two countries jockey for position in the so-called peace talks.

In 2002, under pressure from the US and other major powers, India and Pakistan stepped back from the brink of open war, after mobilising more than one million heavily armed soldiers along the border. Negotiations, which began in 2003 under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government in India, were continued after its defeat at the 2004 election by the new Congress-led coalition.

Washington has been pressing for an end to the rivalry, which threatens to undermine US economic and strategic ambitions on the Indian subcontinent. Not only is India becoming a significant source of cheap labour for American corporations, but the Bush administration is seeking to establish a strategic alliance with New Delhi as a bulwark against China and a stepping-stone to the Middle East and Central Asia. At the same time, the US is relying on Pakistan to assist in suppressing armed resistance to the US-led military presence in neighbouring Afghanistan.

The corporate elite in both countries also sees the economic benefits of ending the conflict. The substantial and growing flow of foreign investment into India, particularly into the IT sector, depends on political stability. As well, Indian businesses want to expand their influence throughout the region. Their counterparts in Pakistan sense the possibilities for capitalising on the inflow of investment into the subcontinent. Other forms of economic cooperation, including plans for a major gas pipeline from Iran, have been

under discussion.

Despite the potential economic benefits, the “composite dialogue” has barely gotten off the ground. So far, New Delhi and Islamabad have agreed only to symbolic gestures: prior-notification for the testing of ballistic missiles, communication on cases of fishermen arrested for straying into each other’s territorial waters and a joint survey of a disputed section of the boundary between the Pakistani province of Sindh and the Indian state of Gujarat.

On the key issue of Kashmir, no progress has been made. At the recently concluded South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit in Bangladesh, the two sides restated long-held positions. Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz told reporters “there is clearly a trust deficit between the two countries” and insisted that the core dispute with India was “over Kashmir”.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared that Pakistan had to do more to stop so-called cross-border terrorism. “There has been some reduction,” he declared, “but unfortunately it is our feeling that all that needs to be done has not been done.” India has repeatedly accused Pakistan of directly supporting armed Kashmiri separatists and insisted that Islamabad prevent the infiltration of “terrorists”.

The conflict over Kashmir is rooted in the communal partition of India in 1947 by the British colonial rulers in collaboration with the Indian bourgeoisie. Newly independent India and Pakistan both had vital strategic and political interests in ensuring Kashmir—a predominantly Muslim region ruled by a Hindu maharaja—became part of their territory. Neither side established control over Kashmir in the three wars that followed and the issue is a rallying point for communal extremists in both countries.

The fact that neither government has any room for compromise demonstrates the extent to which the political establishment in both countries relies on communalism to divide the working class and deflect attention from deepening social and political problems at home. New Delhi and Islamabad are unwilling to make even modest concessions over Kashmir, although the lives of tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of earthquake victims are at stake.



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