

# Train atrocity in India targets “peace process”

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At least 68 persons, including women and children, were killed and some 20 people seriously injured earlier this week, when two firebombs exploded on a train traveling from India’s capital, Delhi, to Lahore, Pakistan.

The firebombs were set off around midnight last Sunday when the train, which is known as the Samjhauta or Friendship Express, was near to Panipat, a city lying about 80 kilometres north of Delhi.

It is unclear who perpetrated this heinous crime. But it is palpably obvious that it was meant to sabotage the Indo-Pakistani peace process, whip up tension between the two countries, and sow discord between India’s Hindu majority and its 150 million-strong Muslim minority.

One day after the bombing, the Pakistani foreign minister was slated to meet his Indian counterpart.

The twice-weekly Samjhauta Express is a symbol of the family ties that bind India and Pakistan, notwithstanding the 1947 communal partition of South Asia into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India. Poor Pakistanis and Indians use this inexpensive mode of transport to meet kith and kin who were forced to migrate as result of the bloodletting that accompanied partition or who remained in their traditional home while their relatives sought refuge on the other side of the newly erected state boundaries.

The train was first launched as the result of a temporary warming in relations between the two countries following the 1971 Bangladesh War, and it was reinstituted, after a two-year hiatus, in 2004, shortly after India and Pakistan agreed to make a new, comprehensive bid to resolve their differences.

Of the 757 passengers traveling on the Samjhauta Express when it was bombed, 553 were Pakistani citizens.

The blast was designed to cause maximum casualties and fatalities. Indian investigators have described the firebombs as timed incendiary devices (TIDs). Explosives were packed in suitcases and put next to bottles of paraffin, kerosene and petrol, and mixed with strips of cloth to prolong the blaze ignited by the initial explosions, which were triggered using small digital alarm clocks.

Two such bombs were later found unexploded.

After the blasts, the train continued to move for nearly 15 minutes, although two carriages were ablaze, thus delaying passengers’ escape. Tara Chand, a passenger told Reuters, “I heard a loud explosion and then it was all smoke”.

Further impeding the passengers’ escape from the burning

carriages was the carriages’ dearth of windows and the iron bars that blocked the few windows that did exist.

Had passengers and local villagers not fought through choking smoke to pull people from the smoke and fire, the death total would have been significantly higher.

Many bodies were charred beyond recognition. Rohtas Singh, a nurse, said, “I have never seen anything like this. Some bodies don’t have legs, some don’t have arms, and some have no faces. Some you can’t even make out if they are men or women.”

After the two burnt carriages were separated, the remainder of the train proceeded to the border town of Attari, where the remaining passengers were transferred to a Pakistani train.

Indian Railway Minister Lalu Prasad Yadav said “security lapses” had enabled the firebombs to be placed on the train. According to railway regulations, the suitcases, in which the bombs were hidden, should not have been allowed on the train, but rather consigned to a baggage car.

Prasad Yadav announced compensation of 1 million Indian rupees (about US\$22,000) for the next of kin of each of the deceased and 50,000 rupees (US\$1,100) for each of the injured. Four railway employees responsible for issuing tickets and security have been suspended for alleged security lapses.

Whoever mounted this attack, it was a heinous crime, designed to produce carnage. Moreover, the target and deliberate wanton slaughter of innocent civilians betrays an ultra-reactionary communal political perspective.

No political group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

On Thursday, police claimed that a phone call lead suggested a Kashmiri connection. The police also say that they have taken into custody some “suspicious” persons from the west Indian state of Rajasthan, but in the wake of terrorist attacks, the authorities frequently detain large numbers of people who prove to be entirely innocent.

Last July, after multiple bomb blasts on commuter trains in Mumbai killed more than 180 people, the United Progressive Alliance government quickly succumbed to pressure from security forces, the corporate media, and the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Hindu-supremacist right and, without producing any evidence, said Pakistan bore much of the blame for the bombing atrocity.

Ignoring official Pakistani condemnations of the attack and offers to assist in the investigation, India indefinitely postponed a meeting of India’s and Pakistan’s foreign secretaries.

The response of the Congress Party-led UPA government to the

Samjhauta Express bombing has been different.

Pakistan Foreign Minister Kurshid Mahmud Kasuri and an almost two-dozen-strong delegation of Pakistani officials were allowed to proceed with their planned four-day visit to India for meetings of the Indo-Pakistan Joint Commission, the bilateral body that has been set up to oversee the peace negotiations initiated in January 2004.

Indian and Pakistani government officials have both vowed that they will not allow the Samjhauta Express bombing to disrupt the peace process.

But Indian police and security officials have been quick to suggest that this week's bombing was the work of Kashmiri and/or Pakistani-based Islamicist terrorist outfits. Thursday, a senior police official from Old Delhi told Reuters, the "pattern points to Islamic terrorists."

These groups certainly are logistically and politically capable of carrying out a Samjhauta Express-type atrocity.

But the timing and target of the attack point to the possibility of it being the work of Hindu-supremacist terrorists and/or elements within the security establishment who are opposed to any rapprochement with Pakistan.

The Hindu right has a long history of murderous, illegal actions, including the 1992 razing of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, which led to the worst communal violence in post-1947 India, and the 2002 Gujarat pogrom.

Moreover, in recent years, there has been evidence of Hindu extremists developing a bomb-making capacity—a development about which the Indian media and security forces have maintained a virtual total silence. In April 2006, two activists in the RSS-affiliated Barjang Dal were killed in a bomb-making accident. The terrorist cell of which the two were members has been linked by authorities to a mosque bombing in which 25 people were injured, also in April 2006, and is suspected of having carried out two other mosque bombings in 2003.

For its part, the BJP, the official and reputedly "moderate" face of Hindu supremacism, has seized on the Samjhauta Express bombing as further grist for its attack on the UPA government for reputedly failing to defend India against terrorism.

Kashmiri separatist groups are rejecting any suggestion that they perpetrated this week's bombing. The United Jihad Council (UJC), a Pakistan-based alliance of armed Kashmir separatist groups, issued a statement that "strongly condemned" the attack and said their struggle is against the Indian government and its security forces, "not against innocent civilians."

In rejecting the accusation that it is responsible for the attack, a spokesperson for the Islamic fundamentalist Lashkar-e-Taiba said the attack was "the handiwork of Indian agencies, [and] Hindu hardliners including Shiv Sena, [a Maharashtra-based Hindu-chauvinist party]."

Shortly after the attack on the train, Pakistani president General Pervez Musharraf issued a statement condemning it. "We will not allow elements which want to sabotage the ongoing peace process to succeed in their nefarious designs," Musharraf declared. "Such wanton acts of terrorism will only serve to further strengthen our resolve" for peace between the two countries.

Denouncing the attack, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

said both countries should "remain steadfast in our commitment to normalize relations."

Referring to these and other such statements, Indian and international media analysts have published articles claiming that they demonstrate the durability of the peace process and arguing that this week's bombing outrage will likely spur the peace talks forward. Typical was an *Asia Times* report headlined "Bombs spur India-Pakistan peace process."

It is certainly true that the Indian and Pakistani governments are under pressure from domestic big business and the major powers to normalize their relations.

After the 2001-2002 war crisis between India and Pakistan, the Bush administration pushed for the two countries to settle their differences, as their longstanding rivalry was destabilizing the region and, thereby, cutting across US objectives of using Pakistan as a "frontline" state in the "war on terror"—i.e., to extend US influence in Central and West Asia—and of supporting a "rising" India so as to "contain" China.

With the US now targeting Iran, the Bush administration is anxious to secure both Pakistani and Indian support and therefore to prevent any flare-up of their longstanding rivalry. (This of course does not prevent the US strongly opposing plans to underpin the Indian-Pakistani rapprochement by building a pipeline to transport Iranian natural gas to India and Pakistan.)

Following the Samjhauta Express bombing, the US issued a statement condemning it and urging both countries to continue with the peace process.

This is not the first time the media has suggested a tragedy will spur the peace process forward. Similar predictions were made after the devastating Kashmiri earthquake of October 2005, which killed 70,000 people in India and Pakistan. The two states refused, however, to mount any effective collaboration in rescuing and rehabilitating earthquake victims, and the peace process remained mired in the traditional disputes.

Although many if not the majority of the victims of the Samjhauta Express bombing were Pakistanis, the Indian government has curtly rejected any suggestion of the two countries mounting a joint investigation. Declared Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, "As per the law of the land, the probe will be conducted by India and the results shared with Pakistan."

As a result of this week's meeting of the Indo-Pakistan Joint Commission, the two countries initialed an agreement to reduce the possibility of an "accidental" nuclear war. Nevertheless, on Friday, Pakistan successfully tested the Hatf VI, a new version of a nuclear-capable surface-to-surface ballistic missile that is able to hit targets at a distance of 2,000 kilometres.



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