Indian security forces murder Kashmiris in phony “encounters”

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A police inquiry that led to the exhumation of the corpses of several innocent civilians killed by Indian security forces in the northern state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has shed light on the murderous campaign the Indian elite and its henchmen in the security apparatus have mounted in India’s only Muslim-majority state for the past two decades.

The J&K police opened an inquiry upon receiving a complaint from the family of a 35 year-old carpenter, Abdur Rehman Paddar, who had gone missing on December 8, 2006 Utilizing the unique phone identification number provided to them by the victim’s family, the investigators traced the phone to an Assistant Sub-Inspector (ASI) of police Farooq Ahmad Gudoo.

ASI Gudoo reportedly had given the phone to a person under police protection—presumably a surrendered Kashmiri secessionist—after reactivating the phone using a newly obtained SIM phone card.

During interrogation, ASI Gudoo confessed that he had taken the phone from Paddar soon after killing him. ASI Gudoo was part of a “Special Operations Group” (SOG) team from Ganderbal police station that had picked up Paddar from his native village, Larnoo, and casually murdered him on Dec. 9. So as to justify his killing and collect a reward, the SOG team then sought to pass off Paddar’s corpse as that of a “Pakistani” militant who, they claimed, had exchanged fire with them.

Indian and international human rights organizations have long-charged that Indian security forces have used phony encounters with “Pakistanis” and “Kashmiri insurgents” to execute captured anti-government insurgents and to kill others deemed politically undesirable by the authorities or who have run afoul of the police and security forces.

Comprised of local police, village informers, and former insurgents who have been bribed and coerced into working for the Indian state, the SOG is generally considered to be the most ruthless of the various Indian security forces active in Jammu and Kashmir. It is widely reputed to have been involved in the disappearance of thousands of Kashmiris, extortion, and custodial killings.

Paddar’s murder would appear to have been motivated by money. The carpenter may have resisted demands from the Ganderbal SOG team for “protection” money or the police may simply have wanted to collect the government reward for killing an insurgent. The killing of Paddar resulted in a reward of 120,000 rupees (about $270) being paid to the SOG team.

After killing Paddar, the police announced publicly that they had killed a Pakistani militant on whom they had found an AK-47 rifle, three magazines, 36 bullets and a grenade. Such routine labeling of the victims of “fake encounters” with India’s security forces as “Pakistanis” is standard procedure. It is aimed at presenting the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir as entirely due to the machinations of Pakistan, India’s historic geo-political rival.

The brutality of the SOG is underscored by the state of Paddar’s corpse—his face was all but totally mutilated by the shooting.

During the course of the investigation of Paddar’s disappearance, other police murders came to light including that of two impoverished street vendors, Nazir Ahmad Deka and Ghulam Nabi Wani. Deka, a father of three children who sold perfume on the pavement for a living, was picked up by the SOG and murdered in February 2006. The police passed him off as a militant belonging to the Pakistani-based Islamicist group Lashkar-i-Tayba. The briefcase that Deka used to keep his perfume was reportedly found at the house of ASI Gudoo.

Ghulab Wani was picked up in March 2006 and murdered. He was publicly identified as an Islamic “terrorist” who was killed in a joint police-army operation.

All of these victims were poor and supposedly were forced to pay bribes to the police for “favors”—favors that may have been as meager as permission to sell their wares in a choice or preferred spot in a market.

In late January and early February the investigating police exhumed bodies of several other victims in addition to those of Paddar, Deka and Wani. These victims are also believed to be civilians who were in no way connected to the insurgency against the Indian state.

The public outrage over the killings has led to the arrest of the Ganderbal Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Hans Raj Parihar and of the Deputy Superintendent of Police(DSP), Bahadur Ram.

Although there have been countless complaints from Kashmiris and numerous reports from Indian and international human rights organizations charging that the Indian government has allowed its security forces in Kashmir to run amuck, these officers are among the most senior, if not the highest-ranking, officers arrested for human rights violations in Kashmir since the anti-Indian insurgency began in 1989.

The Indian government, as part of its attempt to reach a rapprochement with Pakistan, has recently sent out feelers to elements within the Kashmiri opposition. Reining in the most

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brazen murderers within the security apparatus may be a government maneuver aimed at creating conditions more conducive to launching negotiations.

The authorities are also acutely aware of the depth of the popular anger in Kashmir. While many Kashmiris are repelled by the reactionary Islamicist ideology espoused by many of the anti-Indian insurgents, especially those most closely connected to Pakistan, there is also a visceral popular feeling against the Indian authorities because of the bloody authoritarian methods they have employed in upholding Indian rule.

The current Congress Party and People's Democratic Party (PDP) state coalition government came to power in 2002 by making grandiose promises to the electorate. These included promising to "heal" the physical and psychological "wounds" inflicted upon the Kashmiri people by a decade and half of brutal Indian military operations. They also promised to show "zero-tolerance" to human rights violations and to investigate all cases of custodial killings by police.

As the fate of Paddar clearly illustrates, none of these promises have been kept. Human-rights violations and killings by security forces and the police have continued unabated over the last four years.

In the wake of the exposure of the Paddar's murder as an SOG "fake-encounter," there have been angry demonstrations demanding that the chiefs of police who have overseen the practice of fake or phony encounters be severely punished. Thousands of people, including the families of several of the victims, have taken to the streets demanding justice.

On February 6 the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), a major separatist group, called for a "bandh" (a shutdown) that paralyzed life in Srinagar, the summer capital of the state Members of the All-Party Hurriyat Conference, an amalgamation of 26 Kashmiri political, religious and civic organization that also support Kashmiri separatism, also held demonstrations in Srinagar.

Even the exposure of these heinous crimes has not resulted in any pause in police repression. The peaceful protest was met with a salvo of tear gas by the police.

The roots of the current Kashmir tragedy are to be found in the 1947 communal partition of South Asia, when India's departing British colonial overlords joined forces with the bourgeois Indian National Congress and the Muslim League to create a Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India.

War soon broke out over the fate of Jammu and Kashmir, a princely state with a Muslim-majority adjacent to Pakistan, but whose Hindu princely ruler and largest political party favored accession to India.

For the six ensuing decades, Kashmir has been split into Indian- and Pakistani-controlled regions with the two states continuing to stake their rival claims to all of Jammu and Kashmir and engaging in countless subterfuges to realize their ambitions.

While Pakistan long-sought to fan opposition to the Indian government in Indian-held Kashmir, a popular insurgency only broke out in 1989, two years after the Indian authorities had once again rigged an election in the state. In the years prior to the launching of the Kashmir insurgency, India's Congress Party government had whipped up Hindu chauvinism while brutally suppressing a Sikh fundamentalist agitation in the Punjab and the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had emerged as a major political force across north India..

Like India's north-east, Jammu and Kashmir has long suffered economic neglect. Both regions are wracked by separatist insurgencies fed by youth who face a bleak future either of unemployment or working at marginal jobs.

Although the secessionist movements are fundamentally reactionary, they nevertheless arise out of festering socio-economic and political grievances. Incapable of tackling the root causes of these grievances, the Indian bourgeoisie has relied upon anti-democratic legislation to empower the military and police forces to crush the insurgencies through a rampage of killing, kidnapping, and rape.

In J&K, the Indian government has utilized the repressive Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act of 1990 to suppress the militancy This legislation grants almost unchecked power to the armed forces to declare an area "disturbed," arrest people at will, and to open fire at their discretion.

The results have been catastrophic, with at least 60,000 people killed, thousands of women raped, and hundreds if not thousands of people kidnapped. Many of the latter have ended up dead like the victims mentioned above. Most of this human toll can be laid directly at the feet of the Indian security forces.

It is impossible to convey in the short space of this article the repression and tragedy the population of J&K has been subjected to at the hands of the Indian government over the past two decades. Every month many women whose husbands have disappeared hold demonstrations at which they silently hold up their husbands' photographs so as to demand that the authorities inquire into the whereabouts of their loved ones. These women cannot collect pensions or inherit property belonging to their missing husbands without an official record of their deaths.

The recently exposed police murders in J&K are not isolated incidents but instead are part of a long-term systematic violation of the most basic human rights of the people of Jammu and Kashmir by the Indian state. At most a handful of the perpetrators have been prosecuted. Instead, the security forces have been showered with rewards and promotions for chalking up kills.

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