

Indian government resorts to armed repression in Kashmir, killing 21 and wounding hundreds

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Indian government security forces have shot dead at least 21 unarmed civilians and wounded hundreds of others over the past week in an attempt to repress widespread protests in the northern Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K)—India's only majority Muslim state—over the economic blockade imposed by Hindu-chauvinist groups.

The largest number of killings, at least 20, occurred on Tuesday August 12, when police opened fire on angry demonstrators threatening to walk across the “Line-of-Control” to the Pakistani-occupied portion of the state as a way to circumvent the economic blockade. This was a desperate attempt to export fruit and other commodities using roads passing through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir to other states in India.

The protests erupted after Hindu-communist mobs, at the instigation of India's opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), imposed an “economic blockade” on the state by occupying roads and bridges in Jammu, located in the southern portion of J&K. The Hindu mobs claimed to be protesting against the state government's decision to rescind its previous grant of land to a Hindu shrine board.

The road blockade not only resulted in shortages of food and medicine in the northern Kashmir valley, but has also prevented export of fruit from the state. Tourism and export of fruit form the backbone of state's economic activities. As a result of the road blockade by Hindu-chauvinists, fruit has perished, creating untold economic hardship to fruit growers and workers in J&K.

Despite repeated promises by the state and the Indian government to take measures to end the economic blockade, no sufficient measures were taken against the communalist groups that are leading the blockade.

Although the state's Fruit Growers and Dealers Association initially took the lead in mounting demonstrations, hundreds of thousands of youth and workers also took to the street in pent-up frustration and anger over intolerable daily life they endure under heavily armed occupying Indian security forces. Hundreds of thousands of people erupted in massive protests on August 12 all across the Kashmir valley, and even after a week the protests are continuing.

For over two decades, the people of J&K have been subjected to innumerable security check-points, widespread disappearances, especially of youth, terrorizing night-time raids and the occupation of schools and other civilian buildings by over half a million Indian security forces, all under the guise of fighting separatism and terrorism. Over 1,000 unmarked graves were discovered earlier this year; most likely belonging to victims of the Indian security forces (See “Nearly 1,000 unmarked graves discovered in Indian-occupied Kashmir”).

The separatist All Party Hurriyat Conference, an alliance of 26 separatist groups, soon got involved in the protests, thus providing a pretext for the Indian and the state governments to react with great brutality.

The Pakistani government, which has gratuitously killed thousands of people in Pakistan as a partner in the bogus US-inspired “war on terror,” stoked the Kashmiri political cauldron by lambasting the Indian government for using excessive force, while threatening to internationalize the conflict by taking the issue to the United Nations.

This uprising has dealt a further blow to India-Pakistan relations, which had already been frayed by the bombing of Indian embassy in Kabul on July 7. The Indian External Affairs Ministry issued a strongly worded statement warning Pakistan that such an attempt by Pakistan to internationalize the conflict previously has led to war.

The statement said: “To call for international involvement in the sovereign internal affairs of India is gratuitous, illegal and only reflects reversion to a mindset that has led to no good consequences for Pakistan in the past.”

The Indian government has utilized and continues to use great brutality not only against separatist movements but also against civilians, killing and disappearing tens of thousands of people.

The cause of the latest flare-up was a politically calculated concession by the previous right-wing governor to the Amarnath Yatra Shrine Board. The board is in charge of a famous Hindu shrine that, according to legend, was originally discovered by a Muslim shepherd in mid-19th century.

The former state governor, S.K. Sinha, successfully lobbied the Congress-led coalition government to transfer 100 acres of

forest land in May, ostensibly to provide better facilities to the pilgrims. This was approved by the state cabinet, including Forest Minister Qazi Afzal, who belongs to the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the Congress Party's coalition partner in Kashmir.

The opposition National Conference and the Hurriyat conference immediately opposed this move. These reactionary groups charged that the shrine board would allow building of dwellings for "Hindu-settlers".

On June 28 the PDP pulled out of the coalition government, charging that the governor should be prosecuted for inciting communal war. This political posture was at odds with the fact that a PDP minister himself gave the approval for transfer of land to the shrine board.

On June 30, the government revoked the land grant, setting off agitation and an economic blockade by the Hindu chauvinist groups led by the BJP.

The welfare of the pilgrims was hardly the most important motivation prompting the Congress Party-led coalition to approve the land transfer. As India's corporate daily the *Hindu* observed in an editorial on August 14: "The current crisis is the outcome of policies long advertised as a great success. New Delhi's well-meaning but ill-executed engagement with secessionists propelled the growth of religious reaction in Kashmir. The counter-balancing moves intended to placate Hindu sentiment in Jammu backfired. "

Thus, the land transfer was what the *Hindu* termed a "counter-balancing" move aimed at placating reactionary Hindu organizations, especially the communalist BJP, and at making electoral gains in the state's assembly election set for October by appealing to backward Hindu social layers.

The forces leading the economic blockade in Jammu are being supported not only by the Hindu supremacist BJP but also by the Congress Party itself.

The shrine is a naturally formed ice-Lingam (a Phallic-symbol) located in the Himalayas. According to Hindu beliefs, it symbolizes Lord Shiva, one of the trinities of the Hindu religion. The Lingam lasts for a finite period of time and melts away every year, thus providing only a short period for the pilgrimage.

The shrine is visited by hundreds of thousands of Hindu pilgrims annually and is even coveted by the Muslim masses in the state, as the pilgrimage benefits small businessmen and even the working masses through the sale of food, trinkets, shelter and other needs of the pilgrims.

The Amaranth Shrine Board was created in 1996 in reaction to the deaths of over 250 pilgrims in a snowstorm. The Shrine Board ostensibly is in charge of providing suitable facilities such as toilets, camps, etc. As with every institution in India, it is riddled with incompetence and corruption.

The root cause of the ongoing uprising in Kashmir dates back to the British-designed communal partition of the subcontinent into de-facto "Hindu" India and "Muslim" Pakistan.

Since the communal partition of the subcontinent in 1947, J&K has been subject to political machinations by both the Indian and Pakistani governments. J&K is now split into Indian and Pakistani-occupied regions, with Pakistan infiltrating Islamic fundamentalist militias into the Indian side. However, the separatist movement in the Indian-controlled region did not intensify until 1989, two years after the Indian government held a rigged election.

The J&K region has long suffered economic neglect, just like India's north-east. Both of these regions are wracked by a number of separatist insurgencies fed by youth, who face a bleak future of either unemployment or working at marginal jobs.

Although the secessionist movements are fundamentally reactionary, they nevertheless arise out of festering socio-economic and political grievances. Instead of tackling the root causes of such movements, the Indian state relies upon anti-democratic legislation to empower the armed forces that have gone on a decades-long rampage of killing, kidnapping and rape.

In J&K the Indian government has utilized the repressive Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act, 1990 to suppress unrest, killing thousands of innocent people over the past 15 years. This legislation grants almost unchecked power to the armed forces to declare an area "disturbed," to arrest people at will, and to open fire at their discretion.

Armed separatist movements, however, hardly provide a solution to the intractable problems in Kashmir. They divide the working class along communal lines and sow confusion among the toiling masses.

Only an independent political movement of the Kashmiri working class in a joint struggle for socialism with their class brethren across South Asia can provide a way forward in overcoming the ever-expanding problems that fester in the subcontinent since the so-called independence of 1947.



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