US backing for India fuels tensions with Pakistan

K. Ratnayake, Peter Symonds
5 December 2008

Far from damping down tensions between India and Pakistan, the visit by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to the two countries in the wake of the Mumbai terrorist attacks has only added more fuel to the fire.

In New Delhi on Wednesday, Rice publicly backed India's demands on Pakistan for tough measures against the alleged perpetrators of the atrocity. The following day, after meeting with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari in Islamabad, she declared that Pakistan was "very focussed and committed" to fighting terrorism, but reinforced the message that the Pakistani government had to provide "unequivocal assistance" to India.

Rice's trip took place amid a rash of leaks in the Indian and US media blaming the Pakistan-based Kashmiri separatist group Lashkar-e-Taiba for masterminding the Mumbai attacks. Citing unnamed Indian officials, the *Wall Street Journal* on Wednesday declared that India had identified Yusuf Muzammil as the man who orchestrated the plan. In the Indian press, a myriad of leaked accounts have been published based on the alleged confessions of the one captured gunmen, Ajmal Amir Kasab, who, it is said, admitted to being a member of Lashkar-e-Taiba and training in Pakistan.

An article in today's *Hindu* went one step further to claim that India had "proof" that the Pakistani military intelligence—the Inter-Services Intelligence agency—was involved in the Mumbai terrorist attacks. Significantly, the *New York Times* yesterday cited an unnamed former US Defence Department official as saying that "American intelligence agencies had determined that former officers from Pakistan's Army and its powerful Inter-Services Intelligence agency helped to train the Mumbai attackers".

No evidence has been made public to confirm any of these assertions. Several articles have cast doubt on even the basic claims made about the detained gunman. The British-based *Times* noted that Pakistani officials had been unable to trace Kasab to the village of Faridkot in Punjab—a fact widely cited by Indian police—and pointed out that there were in fact three villages with that name in the province. An article in the *Asia Times* today noted that contradictory stories in the Indian press variously described Kasab as a small-time pickpocket, an impoverished villager and a well-educated youth fluent in English.

Pakistani leaders have repeatedly denied any involvement in the attacks. Speaking to CNN on Tuesday, President Zardari cast doubt over the identity of the arrested gunman, saying: "We have not been given any tangible proof to say that he is definitely a Pakistani. I very much doubt that he's a Pakistani." He blamed "stateless actors" operating throughout the region, and reiterated that Pakistan "itself has been a victim of terrorism and [is] fighting the menace resolutely".

The media leaks, particularly those by US officials, are aimed at undercutting Pakistani disclaimers and reinforcing American demands that Islamabad take action against elements of the military and the ISI who in the past have backed various Islamist militias. That is the message behind Rice's declaration that the Pakistani government had to engage in "rooting out terrorists and rounding up whoever perpetrated this [Mumbai] attack, from wherever it was perpetrated, whatever its sources, whatever the leads".

In pressuring Pakistan to bow to Indian demands, the Bush administration is recklessly aggravating a volatile situation. The unstable Pakistani government is widely

© World Socialist Web Site

regarded as a puppet of Washington for assisting the US-led occupation of Afghanistan by unleashing the military against anti-occupation insurgents operating from border areas in Pakistan. At the same time, the accusations against the ISI will only compound the tense relationship between the Pakistani government and the military.

Moreover, any concessions by Pakistan to longtime rival India may well be used by opposition politicians to whip up nationalist sentiment. On Wednesday, some 2,000 students protested in Islamabad against Rice's visit to India. There is growing outrage that the US and India are exploiting the Mumbai attacks for their own political purposes. This takes place amid widespread discontent and anger over deteriorating living standards as the Pakistani government implements IMF austerity measures as part of an economic bailout package.

The US stance will only encourage the Indian government to take a more belligerent stand against Pakistan. Speaking in a joint press conference on Wednesday with Rice, Indian foreign minister Pranab Mukherjee declared there was "no doubt" that the gunmen had come from Pakistan. He warned that "whatever the government considers necessary to protect its territorial integrity, safety and security of its citizens, the government will do".

Mukherjee's open-ended threat was accompanied by a growing clamour in the Indian media and from opposition Hindu supremacist parties for tough action against Pakistan. On Monday, Mukherjee summoned the Pakistani high commissioner and presented a list of Indian demands, including for Islamabad to arrest and hand over 20 terrorist suspects, most of whom have not even been mentioned in connection with the Mumbai attacks.

Pakistani President Zardari has dismissed Indian demands, saying that New Delhi has provided no evidence against the twenty men. He also insisted that anyone involved in the Mumbai attacks would be dealt with in Pakistani courts rather than extradited to India. Pakistan is yet to formally respond to India but the refusal to hand over the men sets the stage for a further escalation of tensions.

Various diplomatic measures have been discussed in the media by unnamed Indian officials, including suspending ongoing negotiations between the two countries. There are growing demands for military action against "terrorist training camps" in Pakistan. Mukherjee's comment, making clear that all options are under consideration, carries the danger of military conflict between the two nuclear-armed powers. India and Pakistan have already fought three wars over the past sixty years.

Right-wing Hindu extremist groups are whipping up communal tensions inside India. The fascistic Shiv Sena based in Mumbai has called in its newspaper for the dismantling of "mini-Pakistans" inside India, before teaching "Pakistan a lesson by launching an attack on it". The reference to mini-Pakistanis is a provocative incitement to pogroms against India's large Muslim minority. Despite claiming to be secular and democratic, the ruling Congress Party, which faces national elections next year, has repeatedly bowed to pressure from the Hindu right in the past.

The ratchetting up of tensions on the Indian subcontinent is an indictment of the ruling elites in both countries. Completely incapable of addressing the elementary social needs and democratic aspirations of working people, they are again stirring up communal divisions as a means of shoring up their political bases. The intrusion of the US into this explosive political mixture in pursuit of its own strategic interests—in the first place to consolidate its occupation of Afghanistan—only heightens the danger of war.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site