

Pakistan's floods, partition and imperialist oppression

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Over the past month more than a fifth of Pakistan's territory and close to a quarter of its cropland have been engulfed in floods, creating a humanitarian crisis which UN officials describe as the greatest in that organization's 65-year history.

Twenty million people are now said to have been affected, whether by the inundation of their homes and workplaces or the destruction of their crops and livestock. Eight million Pakistanis require emergency relief, including many of the more than one million people who have been displaced in southern Sind just in the past few days.

The official death toll is currently above 1,600, but it is universally conceded that it will rise much higher once the flood waters recede and the full extent of the destruction is revealed.

The UN and international aid agencies warn that literally millions are at risk of death from acute cholera, other water-borne diseases, and hunger, since the government-led relief effort has failed to provide clean water, food and shelter to more than a tiny fraction of those affected.

This is a calamity of monumental dimensions. Yet for the rival national bourgeoisies of Pakistan and India, who have been locked in a reactionary military and geo-political rivalry since their states' birth as a result of the 1947 Partition of the subcontinent, it has been business as usual.

Only after the floods had been ravaging Pakistan for more than two weeks did India's government offer Islamabad a paltry \$5 million in aid as a "gesture of solidarity with the people of Pakistan."

Pakistan then took a week to weigh the offer, citing the "sensitivities involved." It took a telephone call from the Indian prime minister to his Pakistani counterpart and public prodding from Washington to get Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi to announce that his government would accept New Delhi's aid offer.

The diplomatic to-do over providing a spoonful of aid to Pakistan's flooded toilers elicited little comment from the press in either India or Pakistan. The countries' respective media have a long history of echoing and amplifying the

politicians' nationalist and communally-charged claims, blaming all manner of social and political problems on the archrival's "hidden hand."

The India-Pakistan rivalry and Partition are, however, very much at the root of the current tragedy.

Defying socio-economic, historical, and cultural logic, the subcontinent was divided in 1947 by India's departing British colonial overlords and the bourgeois politicians of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League into a Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India.

The artificial borders imposed though Partition have made it impossible to rationally manage South Asia's internal waterways so as to provide irrigation, electrification and flood-protection for all. Indeed, water is one of the principal issues in dispute between New Delhi and Islamabad, notwithstanding the World Bank-sponsored 1960 Indus Water Treaty.

In India as in Pakistan, the ruling elite has failed to develop basic public infrastructure, preferring to squander vital resources on war and armaments, including nuclear weapons. India and Pakistan have fought three declared wars and less than a decade ago came to the brink of a fourth.

Partition is treated by the ruling elites of India and Pakistan as a "birth-pang" in the emergence of "democratic India" and a "national homeland for South Asia's Muslims." This only underscores their callous indifference to the masses of South Asia, whatever their ethnicity, religion, or caste.

The immediate outcome of Partition was massive communal bloodletting that resulted in the death of up to two million Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims and the forced relocation of 14 million people—the largest mass migration in human history.

Partition defined and defines the "freedom" and "independence" incarnated in bourgeois India and Pakistan. Far from being an aberration, it was only the most bloody and immediately apparent consequence of the political suppression of the mass anti-imperialist movement that convulsed South Asia in the first half of the 20th century.

The Indian National Congress led by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru presented themselves as the innocent victims of a Partition purportedly orchestrated by the British and the Muslim League. But if the bourgeois leaders of the Congress betrayed their own ideal of a democratic secular India uniting all the peoples of the subcontinent, it was because they were hostile to and organically incapable of mounting a struggle to unify South Asia from below through an appeal to the common class interests of the workers and peasants of the subcontinent.

To the contrary, the growing wave of working class and peasant struggles in post-World War II India and the evident dissension within the ranks of the British Indian Army convinced the Congress leaders that they needed to get control of the colonial state forthwith to thwart social revolution.

Post-independence, the rival regimes consolidated the rule of the bourgeoisie at the expense of the masses, preventing an agrarian revolution, protecting the wealth of the princes, and suppressing worker unrest.

Six decades on, the rival bourgeoisies of India and Pakistan have proven their utter incapacity to resolve any of the burning democratic and social issues that confront the toilers of South Asia. Half of the world's poor live in the subcontinent. In no region of the world is a greater proportion of the population malnourished. Neither the Indian or Pakistani state spends more than 5 percent of gross domestic product on education and health care.

And in keeping with the reactionary logic of Partition and the Indo-Pakistani rivalry, no region of the world is less economically integrated.

Unable to provide any progressive solution to the crisis of capitalist rule in South Asia, the Indian and Pakistani bourgeoisies have increasingly resorted to communalism, ethnic-nationalism, casteism, and religious fundamentalism to divide the masses.

Partition was and remains a mechanism for imperialist domination of the region. The Pakistani bourgeoisie quickly accepted Washington's offer to serve as a "frontline state" in the US's cold war confrontation with the Soviet Union. Time and again, the US has propped up military dictatorships in Pakistan, most recently that of General Pervez Musharraf. With devastating consequences for the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the US partnered with Pakistani dictator General Zia-ul Haq in the 1980s to organize and arm the Islamic fundamentalist opposition to the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan.

Today, in defiance of the sentiments of its own people, the Pakistani government is playing a pivotal role in supporting the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan.

The Indian bourgeoisie made a show of "independence"

from Washington during much of the cold war. But this conflict was about nothing more than gaining greater maneuvering room and the terms of its subordinate relationship with world imperialism. Over the past decade, while the US has waged wars of aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Indian bourgeoisie has forged a "global strategic" partnership with Washington.

During the cold war, the US helped perpetuate and manipulate the Indo-Pakistani conflict in pursuit of its own predatory interests. Recently it has sought to lessen tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad. Hence its pressure on Islamabad to accept the pittance in flood relief money offered by New Delhi.

But such actions are motivated solely by the US's current strategic calculations. It needs Pakistan's support in Afghanistan and wants Islamabad to use troops deployed on its eastern border with India to intensify the counter-insurgency war against anti-occupation forces inside Pakistan.

Washington has spared no effort to scuttle the plans for a "peace pipeline" that would carry natural gas from Iran to Pakistan and then India, because it would undermine its campaign to economically isolate Iran. Similarly, the US ignored Pakistani warnings that the Indo-US civilian nuclear accord could trigger a nuclear arms race in South Asia, because Washington is eager to woo India as a strategic partner and counterweight to China.

Six decades of independence have demonstrated the incapacity of the Indian and Pakistani bourgeoisie to achieve the fundamental tasks of the democratic revolution—the liquidation of landlordism, the abolition of caste oppression, the separation of church and state, national unification and independence. These burning tasks will be achieved only on the basis of the perspective of Permanent Revolution, i.e., as part of an anti-capitalist struggle led by the working class and embracing all the toilers and oppressed.

In South Asia a key element in the perspective of Permanent Revolution is the fight to liquidate the 1947 Partition from below, through the establishment of the Socialist United States of South Asia.

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