Uttar Pradesh government sanctions mass expulsion of Muslim villagers

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Tens of thousands of Muslims who were attacked and driven from their villages by Hindu communalists three months ago are being illegally blocked from returning to their homes by the Samajwadi Party (SP–Socialist Party) government of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state.

Exploiting the vulnerability of people who have lost their homes and livelihoods, the SP government is using an offer of woefully inadequate compensation to extort pledges from the dispossessed Muslims that they will never return to their native villages in Uttar Pradesh's Muzaffarnagar District . This constitutes nothing less than state support for the expulsion of the Muslims—akin in both its methods and outcome to ethnic cleansing (although, apart from their religion, the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh are identical to their Hindu compatriots).

Neither India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) nor India's Supreme Court have intervened to stop this blatantly exclusivist and unconstitutional victimization of members of the largest religious minority in what purports to be the "world's largest democracy."

Barred from returning to their own homes, overwhelmingly poor, and without political support, the internally exiled Muslims of Muzaffarnagar are being left to languish in wretched refugee camps, consisting of nothing more than flimsy plastic tents. Abandoned by both the UP state and the Indian governments, these traumatized villagers who ran away with almost nothing other than the clothes they were wearing are being forced to survive on the meagre emergency relief provided them by the SP government and aid from volunteer organizations. With very little food, water, medical care and no proper toilet facilities and exposed to bitter winter cold, the relief camps are becoming incubators for sickness. At least 50 children have already died and many other people who are sick are at grave risk since they have no access to proper medical care. The refugee camps, in other words, have become even more deadly to their inhabitants than the communal violence that forced them to flee their homes in Muzaffarnagar. The first large scale attacks occurred in early September, when the reactionary leaders of the Jat Mahapanchayat (Great Council) — a caste-body that purports to represent the interests of the Jats, historically a land-owning peasant group—mobilized angry mobs to attack "Muslims," whom they held responsible for the deaths of two Hindu Jat youth. These mobs went on a rampage, driving all or most of the Muslims out of a number of villages. At least 48 people, most of them Muslims, were killed. Thousands of others were injured with a number of Muslim women gang-raped. These attacks left over 50,000 people, mostly Muslims, homeless.

There is much evidence showing that cadres of Hindu-supremacist organizations—the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and its "partners," the RSS (Rashriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or National Volunteers Organization), and the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad or the World Hindu Council)—helped instigate the mass violence against Muzaffarnagar's Muslim villagers. The New Delhi-based Center for Policy Analysis, for example, has published an extensive report on the role of the BJP and its allies. These organizations have a long history of fomenting communal influence.

The Center for Policy Analysis report and other credible sources have also provided compelling evidence that the SP government held back the police from intervening when communal strife erupted in Muzaffarnagar — deliberately allowing the communal attacks on the Muslims to proceed.

On Oct. 28, almost two months after the Muslims had been expelled from their villages, the state government under the leadership of Chief Minister Akilesh Yadav announced that it will provide 500,000 Rupees

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(approximately US$8,000) to each displaced family to "compensate" them for the loss of their houses and livelihoods.

According to the government, this offer has been made to 1,600 families.

However, to receive this meager sum, the Muslim victims must sign an affidavit promising never to return to their villages and homes.

The affidavit declares: "Myself and members of my family who have left our village and our homes due to violent incidents in our village, will not now return to our original village and home under any circumstance."

Compensation from the UP government is also conditional on the signees foregoing any other government compensation "for property in their village, or any more immovable property."

While sanctioning, and indeed, enforcing the expulsion of Muzaffarnagar's Muslims, the government is cynically claiming that any property they possess will still remain in their names and that they will be free to sell it or keep it. In practice, such legal niceties have no meaning. The villagers are utterly fearful of even setting foot in their villages. They well know that the state government will not protect them from any attack, even if they return home only for a short period to conduct business transactions, and that to do so now risks depriving them of the little government compensation available.

The Stalinist CPI (M) (Communist Party of India-Marxist) has long maintained close political relations with the SP, promoting this reactionary, caste-based outfit as a progressive political force and stalwart defender of secularism. While the SP has been supporting the UPA government from "the outside"—crucially providing it with the votes it need to survive a July 2008 non-confidence motion, when Congress broke its alliance with the CPM-led Left Front to pursue closer relations with Washington—the Stalinists are currently wooing the SP. Their hope is the SP will join it in a Third Front (anti-Congress/anti-BJP) alliance in next spring's general election. Toward this end, the CPM welcomed the SP to participate in its October 30 "Secular Convention" and has maintained a criminal silence on its sanctioning of anti-Muslim communal-cleansing. (See: "Indian Stalinists invoke Hindu-communalist threat").

Meanwhile, the SP state government has been seeking to shut down the refugee camps, since it considers the displaced villagers as little more than human refuse. That this is the sole goal of the SP government was observed by a volunteer at one of the relief camps. Commenting to the press he stated, "People are being called to the tehsil (local government) office and made to sign these papers. Many of them have sustained losses of about Rs 10 lakh (1 million rupees, about US$16,000), but are settling for much less. The administration is forcing them to leave the relief camps which have become an embarrassment for them."

In its original notification, the SP government had stated that the compensation was restricted to "Muslim victims," despite the fact that a small section of non-Muslim families also lost their homes.

India's Supreme Court, in a Nov. 22 ruling in response to a legal complaint filed on behalf of some Jat families, ordered the SP government to reissue the notification to stipulate that compensation would be provided to any displaced family, regardless of religious affiliation, who agreed to the government's terms.

In response, the attorney for the SP government presented its sanctioning and support for the Muslims' expulsion—that is for "communal cleansing"—as a voluntary relocation program. "The team which visited the relief camps," said the government attorney, "thought only Muslims wanted **relocation**. Now, it will be extended to all, whoever wants to **relocate.** " [Emphasis added]

As for the court—the ostensible guardian of India's secular constitution—it was utterly indifferent to the fact that the government was making compensation to the victims of communal violence conditional on their permanent, state-enforced expulsion from their native villages. It merely wanted to ensure that this crime was given a "secular" cover by not explicitly limiting it to Muslims.

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