

Death toll rises to 25, as India-Pakistan border clashes heighten war danger

Alex Lantier

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At least 25 people, the vast majority of them civilians, have been killed during the past five days of heavy, cross-border artillery and machine gun fire between India and Pakistan in the disputed Kashmir region.

Yesterday, Indian police reported that Pakistani shelling across the Line of Control (LoC) that separates Indian- and Pakistan-held Kashmir had killed seven people, including three women and two children, in the Ramgarh sector of Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state.

This followed the deaths Monday of one soldier and one civilian in India and of six Pakistani civilians in the Nakyal and Jandrot sectors of Pakistani-controlled Azad Kashmir. Cross-border exchanges also claimed the lives of two members of the Indian security forces and six Pakistan civilians last Friday and Saturday.

The border clashes, which flared up after India blamed Pakistan for a September 18 attack on the Indian army base at Uri, threaten to trigger all-out war between South Asia's rival nuclear-armed states.

"It appears as if a full-blown war is going on between India and Pakistan. Please have mercy and stop it," villager Mohammed Saeed told Reuters by telephone, in an interview interrupted by the sound of gunfire. Hundreds of schools have been closed in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, and anger and fear over the war is mounting in the population on both sides of the border.

Both Indian and Pakistani military commanders have pledged to intensify the fighting, however. Late Monday, the Pakistani army's Inter-Services Public Relations agency issued a statement declaring that its forces were "effectively targeting Indian posts for heavy casualties," in retaliation for "Indian targeting of civil population by unprovoked firing on LoC."

Indian Defense Ministry officials told Asian News International, "They have targeted our forward areas and we have also responded appropriately. They are using 120 mm, i.e. heavy, mortars and we are also responding in equal measure... We are hitting them hard."

Indian Border Security Force (BSF) Deputy Inspector

General Dharmendra Pareek praised what he called a "calibrated retaliation" yesterday by BSF forces, who "targeted Pakistan Rangers' posts across IB [the international border] in the same sector and caused heavy damage to 14 Pakistani posts."

Six weeks after the Uri attack, it is clear that the attack on the Indian military camp only served to intensify a conflict whose causes are far more deeply rooted.

Officials on both sides of the LoC are whipping up nationalism and war fever, both to suppress rising social anger and divide workers along national and communal lines, and as part of an international escalation of military tensions driven above all by the US's anti-China "pivot to Asia."

India in particular has been shaken by social protests, including protests and strikes by tens of millions of workers against the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) austerity measures and pro-business market reforms.

The Uri camp attack was seized upon by New Delhi to legitimize and deflect attention from the Indian security forces' bloody repression of mass protests in Kashmir. The protests, which have rattled India's Hindu supremacist BJP government and the Indian establishment as a whole, erupted in July following the Indian security forces' summary execution of Burhani Wali, an Islamist fighter calling for Kashmiri independence.

The crackdown on the anti-Indian protests in the Kashmir Valley has claimed the lives of more than 80 people and brutal police attacks on protesters are continuing.

Yesterday three girls aged 13, 16, and 18 were admitted to a hospital in Srinagar with wounds to the face, ears and eyes, after security forces shot them with pellet guns in the southern district of Pulwama, allegedly in response to stone throwing by protesters. Their families stated that they had not joined the protests. All three face weeks of painful operations in a desperate attempt to restore their sight, their hearing, and their ability to speak.

In this context, and with the support of Washington, the Indian government responded to the attack on the Uri base

with unprecedented measures. This included threatening to abrogate the Indus Water Treaty and boasting that its Special Forces' troops had mounted raids inside Pakistan and inflicted heavy casualties.

For more than four decades, New Delhi had not admitted to carrying out any military actions inside Pakistan, fearing that such statements could trigger a chain of strikes and counterstrikes that could escalate into all-out war. Now, nearly two decades after India and Pakistan both acquired nuclear weapons, India is proclaiming that the days of "strategic restraint" are over and that, if need be, it will wage war to enforce its demand that Pakistan cease supporting "terrorism"—deliberately stoking a conflict that could ultimately provoke a nuclear exchange claiming hundreds of millions of lives.

Over the last year, US officials signed military agreements with India that have turned it into a front-line state in Washington's military-strategic offensive against China. If a major war were to develop between India and Pakistan, China's principal ally in the Indian subcontinent and Indian Ocean region, it must be assumed that it would draw both the United States and China into a global conflict.

This danger has become so palpable that, amid escalating popular opposition to war in the border areas, officials presiding over the repression in Kashmir felt compelled to beg New Delhi not to escalate the conflict too far. Yesterday, Jammu and Kashmir (JK) Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti called for India and Pakistan to resume negotiations.

"We in JK yearn for peace as we have been suffering immensely because of the hostility and violence in the region and know very well its dangers and perilous consequences," she said, adding, "We see world-over how wars have resulted in complete destruction of once most prosperous countries and annihilation of cultures."

Powerful factions of the Indian ruling elite, of all political colorations, have supported the military escalation, however. In September, at the initiative of the Stalinist-led state government, the assembly in the southern Indian state of Kerala provocatively endorsed the Indian army's "surgical strike" attacks inside Pakistan. Its resolution, moved by Chief Minister and Communist Party of India (Marxist) Politburo member Pinarayi Vijayan, declared: "The House congratulates the Army for taking steps to protect the country and people and fully supports its action."

The BJP government and Indian elite have intensified their campaign of threats, bullying, and provocations against Pakistan based on two interlinked calculations: that their ever-closer strategic partnership with the US gives them new leverage over Islamabad and that Washington shares their anger and concern that Pakistan and China have responded

to the emergence of an Indo-US alliance by enhancing their own strategic ties.

They have not been disappointed. In a reckless move, the Obama administration and the US political and media establishment have given New Delhi ever-clearer signals that they are ready to go much further than in similar crises in the past in supporting India in pursuing aggression against Pakistan.

This has included ignoring Islamabad's concerns about India's involvement in its northwestern neighbor Afghanistan and announcing a trilateral US, Afghan, Indian dialogue. It has also seen Washington give cautious, tacit support to an Indian plan to break Pakistan's blockade of Indian-Afghan trade and strategically compete with China for resources and influence in Central Asia though the building of a trade corridor, even though the plan's pivot is a port, Chabahar, that is located in Iran—a country the US views as a major regional rival and key obstacle to its regime-change war in Syria.

In September, prominent US newspapers indicated their support for India taking military action against Pakistan in reprisal for the Uri attack, with the *Los Angeles Times* titling one such piece "India has one of the world's biggest armies, why doesn't it use it?"

Last month, the Obama administration directly stated that its sympathies lie with New Delhi against Islamabad. While emphasizing "caution," it lined up behind the BJP government's illegal and highly provocative attacks inside Pakistan, declaring, "We empathize with the Indian position that it needs to respond militarily to the cross-border threat of terrorism."



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