Report exposes Indian state's unrelenting repression in Kashmir

Kranti Kumara
23 December 2016

The population of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), India's only Muslim-majority state, confronts unrelenting repression by heavily-armed central and state government security forces, including indiscriminate pellet-gun barrages, arbitrary and repeated arrests, and deliberate blinding and killing of unarmed protestors. This is the central conclusion of a report issued by a 25-member "fact-finding" group drawn from left-liberal NGOs.

The volunteer group, which included Medha Patkar of the Narmada Bachao Andolan and Anuradha Bhasin of the Pakistan-India Peoples' Forum for Peace and Democracy, visited India's northern-most state for 10 days in November.

Their report extensively documents widespread and shocking human rights violations by the Indian state and blatantly criminal behavior by security personnel.

India's Hindu Supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government and its local partner, the J&K People's Democratic Party, responded with ferocious violence to the mass protests that convulsed the Kashmir Valley during much of the summer and fall. The protests erupted following the July 8 "encounter killing"—i.e. summary execution—of a 21 year-old leader of an Islamist, Kashmiri separatist insurgent group, the Hizbul Mujahideen.

Rattled by the size and tenacity of the protests, the BJP government blamed them on Pakistan-supported "terrorists" and ratcheted up pressure on Islamabad. Its aims were two-fold: to draw attention away from the popular protests in J&K and their brutal repression at the hands of the India state and to compel Islamabad to end all logistical support for the quarter-century long insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir.

In late September, the BJP government plunged South Asia into its gravest war crisis in at least 15 years. It ordered illegal and highly provocative cross-border raids inside Pakistan-held Kashmir in reputed retaliation for the September 18 Islamist attack on the Indian military base at Uri, then vowed it would continue to impose an "unacceptable" price on Pakistan until all attacks on India from Pakistan ceased.

When the 25-member fact-finding group visited Kashmir between November 11 and 20, the Indian and Pakistani armies were mounting massive military barrages across the Line of Control that separates Indian- and Pakistan-held Kashmir, effectively blowing apart the shaky truce that has prevailed between the rival nuclear-armed states since 2003.

The "civil society" fact-finding report notes that the concentration of security forces in J&K is among the heaviest in the world. An estimated 700,000 Indian Army, paramilitary and state police forces watch over a population of just 14 million. Moreover, because of the legal immunity granted the state police under the J&K Public Safety Act (1978) and the army and paramilitary forces in Kashmir under India's notorious Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), they can and do act with impunity.

The fact-finding volunteers traveled to the Kashmir Valley districts where the recent protests have been most widespread and gathered much evidence of the violence and humiliations that the Indian military and state police have imposed on the local populace.

The report states "(unarmed) protests have been met with sustained attack by the Indian army, police and paramilitary, including with the use of pellet guns, (chili-based) PAVA shells and firearms. *We learnt of several deaths caused by targeted killings of unarmed civilians by armed forces in the absence of protests or demonstrations*." (Emphasis added)

The volunteers further found that most pellet-gun wounds have been above the waist, indicating that security forces have deliberately sought to blind and kill protesters.

"Most deaths we came across," say the volunteers, "have been caused by injuries waist-above, without any warning fire. Deaths and injuries caused by pellet guns too are all above the waist and preponderantly at eye level causing blinding or long-term ophthalmic damage."

Casualty counts vary, as the government is trying to cover up the scale of its repression and families often fear informing authorities that a member has been injured for fear of reprisals. But close to a hundred civilians have been killed since the protests erupted in early July. Many thousands more—the J&K daily *Greater Kashmir* claims 15,000—have been injured.

The report notes that Indian security forces invariably justify their violence by dubbing its victims as "anti-national." In fact, this is a catch-all phrase that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP government routinely employ against persons or organizations expressing even sympathy with the victims of the state repression in Kashmir.

© World Socialist Web Site

The report documents how families that pursue legal remedies against the security personnel responsible for the killing of their loved ones are subjected to raids, repeated arrests and even torture from the out-of-control security establishment.

Collective punishments, including destruction of property and animals and revenge attacks, akin to those Israel's security forces mete out to the Palestinians, are the norm in Kashmir. The fact-finding report bears witness to this: "In the towns and villages where there were killings by the Indian Army, police and paramilitary, we met with ordinary people who narrated a cycle of search and seizure raids following killings, and of indiscriminate firing, including at funerals and memorial gatherings. In several of these instances the Indian Army, police and paramilitary broke windows and destroyed household goods, livestock, and food rations in peoples' homes."

"In several of the villages and towns we visited," continues the report, "*the armed forces, during their search and seizure operations, routinely destroy the local electricity transformer or sub-station, denying the entire village or locality access to electricity*." (Emphasis added)

The mass character of the protests in the Kashmir Valley have given the lie to the Modi government's claims that the opposition to Indian rule is simply or mainly the product of Pakistani intrigue and "Pakistani-sponsored terrorism." The Kashmiri separatist groups supported by Islamabad were in fact taken by surprise by this summer's eruption of mass protests.

The report describes the widespread popular disaffection with an Indian state that has repeatedly violated J&K's special autonomous status within the Indian Union, imposed "presidential" or central government rule, rigged elections, and for decades resorted to mass repression, including "disappearances," torture and summary executions. "From common people," says the report, "we heard articulate accounts of what they have faced from the Indian state and, in particular, of the sustained attack on their democratic rights from 1989 onwards. The failure of the Indian state and every government since independence to address the political sentiments of Kashmiri people is a source of both hurt and enormous resentment."

The Modi government's violent repression of the popular protests in J&K has been politically aided and abetted by the opposition parties, including the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its Left Front. All of them unequivocally defend the right of the Indian bourgeoisie to rule over Kashmir, have helped in the cover-up of the atrocities being carried out by Indian security forces in Kashmir, and have hailed the provocative "military strikes" that Indian Special Forces troops carried out inside Pakistan in late September.

The Kashmir tragedy and the reactionary military-strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan with which it is inextricably enmeshed are the outcome of the reactionary communal Partition of South Asia. In 1947, South Asia's departing British imperial overlords and the rival factions of the "national" bourgeoisie divided the subcontinent into an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India.

While the India ruling class and its state have repressed the people of Jammu and Kashmir, the Pakistani bourgeoisie has run roughshod over the basic rights of the people of Pakistan-held Kashmir and systematically sought to manipulate the Kashmir question for its own reactionary ends. Islamabad responded to the eruption of mass opposition to the Indian state, after New Delhi rigged the 1989 elections, by sponsoring Islamist insurgent groups, whom it used to impose a pronounced communalist and pro-Pakistani outlook. This included mounting violent attacks on J&K's Hindu and Sikh minorities.

The reactionary character of the Indian-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir is exemplified by the legal basis of their respective claims to "undivided" Kashmir i.e., to all of the territories that had belonged, prior to Partition, to the British Indian Empire princely state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Pakistan's claim is based on the reactionary communalist ideology that underlies the Pakistani state: Kashmir is rightfully Pakistan's because it is a majority-Muslim area contiguous to the Muslim "homeland" in the subcontinent's northwest.

India, meanwhile, bases its claim not on the support of the Kashmiri people, but on the document of accession to the Indian Union signed by the last member of the British-backed Hindu princely dynasty that ruled Jammu and Kashmir.

The democratic rights of the Kashmiri people will be secured and the threat of a catastrophic nuclear war between India and Pakistan lifted only through a joint, working class-led struggle of the masses of the subcontinent to put an end to capitalist rule and establish the Socialist United States of South Asia.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site