

Indian establishment lauds military's use of Kashmiri youth as "human shield"

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24 May 2017

Indian army head General Bipin Rawat has awarded a commendation to the officer who gained national notoriety last month for ordering a Kashmiri youth tied to the hood of a jeep as a "human shield."

The honor is part of a full-throated establishment campaign in defence of Major Nitin Leetul Gogoi who on April 9 had 26-year-old Farooq Dar seized and, in flagrant violation of international law, paraded around for hours while tied to the lead vehicle of an army convoy.

India's military, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) national government, Congress Party opposition, and corporate media have all leaped to Gogoi's support, describing his actions as a legitimate, even shrewd means of countering anti-government "stone-pelters."

This stands in striking contrast with the views of Kashmiris and tens of millions of other Indians. There was shock and anger when video footage of the incident was posted on line. In the footage an army officer can be heard warning "all stone-pelters will meet the same fate."

To defuse popular outrage, the military announced that it was convening a court of inquiry to investigate the incident. But predictably this has proven to be a cruel joke. For a quarter century, India's military has functioned as a law unto itself in Indian-held Kashmir, carrying out summary executions, torture, and disappearances with guaranteed legal impunity under the notorious Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act.

Whilst the inquiry has supposedly been underway, military and political leaders have been lining up to praise Gogoi. He showed "quick-thinking, presence of mind and initiative," one senior army officer told the *Indian Express*.

Lest there be any doubt, the Indian Army spokesman

who revealed Monday that Gogoi has been awarded a Chief of Army Staff Commendation Card, stipulated that it was due to his "sustained efforts in counter-insurgency operations," including his actions on April 9.

Earlier, Ram Madhav, the General Secretary of the Hindu supremacist BJP hailed Gogoi, saying "everything is fair in love and war." He then added, "I will compliment him for the decision that he took. He saved lives."

Not to be out done, Amarinder Singh, the Congress Party Chief Minister of Punjab wrote an opinion column for the *Indian Express* on May 20 under the title, "Major Gogoi deserves a distinguished service medal for using human shield against stone-pelters in Kashmir." Claiming that "peace" in Kashmir will only be possible "if the government writ runs large," Singh urged the Indian state to act even more ruthlessly to suppress opposition in India's only Muslim-majority state. The Indian army, wrote the senior Congress leader, needs the "upper hand to be able to negotiate peace on terms that are favourable to the country and in the interest of its people, including our brave jawans (soldiers)."

In a further indication of the authoritarian mindset in ruling circles, BJP Member of Parliament Paresh Rawal tweeted Monday that the army should tie the writer Arundhati Roy to an army jeep. The author of the internationally-acclaimed novel, *The God of Small Things*, Roy has repeatedly been pilloried by BJP and Congress Party leaders for her pointed criticisms of the Indian state's brutal repression in Kashmir.

India's elite has been shaken by the breadth and intensity of the wave of mass protests that have convulsed the Kashmir Valley since last July. Recently, M.K. Narayanan, who served as India's National

Security Adviser for six years ending in 2011, warned that the popular alienation from New Delhi in the Kashmir Valley is now so strong India has effectively lost control of the situation and could soon confront a veritable “intifada.”

But the only response of the BJP government and Indian elite has been more violence.

New Delhi has lashed out against Pakistan, bringing South Asia’s rival nuclear-armed powers perilously close to the brink of war. Yesterday, it boasted that massive cross-border artillery fire had destroyed several Pakistani military “forward” positions inside Pakistan-held Kashmir.

And the Indian state has intensified its repression of the Kashmiri people as exemplified by the criminal treatment of Dar, and the enthusiastic support for it within the Indian establishment.

The April 9 “human shield” incident occurred during polling for a by-election in the Srinagar-Budgam parliamentary constituency, which was the occasion for mass protests. Ultimately, just 7 percent of voters cast ballots, a record-low turnout. Meanwhile, security forces shot dead eight people.

Ironically, Farooq Dar, a resident of Chil village in the Beerwah sub-district was among the few villagers who turned out to cast a vote. The army arrested him when he was attending a condolence meeting at his brother-in-law’s house in Gampora village where some women were protesting against the election. Talking to the *Wire*, Dar later said: “They [the military] damaged my bike, thrashed me severely with gun butts and wooden sticks into an almost unconscious state and tied me to the front of the jeep and paraded me through 10 to 20 villages.”

He added: “I thought my end is near but I kept praying and hoping that people who had seen me would inform my family.”

His elder brother Fayed Ahmad explained how their pleas to the police for Farooq’s release went unheeded until family members, villagers and the local *sarpanch* (elected village head) approached the army camp in the evening. “We pleaded with the army that he [Dar] is not a stone-pelter and it was only then they allowed us to take him home,” said Ahmed.

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