

This week in history: August 7-13

6 August 2023

25 years ago: Bomb attacks on US embassies in East Africa

On August 7, 1998, bombs blew up in front of the American embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, adjacent countries in East Africa. The blasts killed 224 people and wounded more than 4,500.

The Nairobi bomb, far more powerful, killed 213 and wounded 4,000. The blast not only damaged the embassy building but tore through the nearby Cooperative Bank and reduced the seven-floor Ufundi Cooperative House to a pile of rubble. Windows were shattered as far as 10 blocks away. The death toll was the worst in an attack on a US facility overseas since the October 1983 truck bombing of a US Marine barracks in Beirut which killed 241 soldiers.

Many press accounts reported the indifference of US military and government officials towards the largely Kenyan victims of the tragedy. The BBC reported that US investigators sealed off the embassy, even refusing entry to Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi.

The *Financial Times*, the leading British business daily, cited complaints that US marines had rejected requests for picks and shovels when hundreds of rescue workers were frantically digging into the Ufundi House wreckage with their bare hands. A Kenyan police captain told the newspaper, “The French are here, the Israelis are here, the Red Cross are helping and the Hindis are giving us food. Where are our American brothers?” An ambulance worker said, “The Americans have behaved like [obscurity] from day one.”

Several US and Israeli sources, including ABC News and the Tel Aviv newspaper *Ha'aretz*, reported Wednesday that a US informant in Kenya had warned the American government two weeks before the blast that the Nairobi embassy had been targeted for a bomb attack.

The informant was a contact of Israel's Mossad intelligence service, but when American officials checked with Mossad about the reliability of the source, they were advised to treat the report with skepticism. No special security measures were taken at the embassy.

The office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu refused to comment on the *Ha'aretz* article. But the Israeli government's dismissal of this advance warning may account for its extraordinary effort to supply bomb experts and rescue teams in the wake of the bombing, for reasons which have not otherwise been explained.

In response to the attack—for which Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda were later indicted—US President Bill Clinton ordered Operation Infinite Reach on August 20, a series of cruise missile strikes against targets in Sudan and Afghanistan which, at least in the case of Sudan, had no relationship to the embassy bombings.

50 years ago: South Korean opposition leader kidnapped by regime

On August 8, 1973, armed agents of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) attacked, drugged, and abducted Kim Dae-jung from the Hotel Grand Palace in Tokyo. Kim was the head of the New Democratic Party, the leading opposition party in South Korea at the time. In the 1971 South Korean presidential election Kim ran against the sitting president, Park Chung Hee. Kim took over 45 percent of the vote losing to Park but by a far narrower margin than was anticipated.

Following the election Park began implementing his plans to maintain his one-man rule in South Korea, behind a façade of democratic elections. He imposed a new constitution that allowed him to serve as president for life and made the activities of opposition political parties illegal.

Kim, who had received five million votes, and his New Democratic Party were a major target of Park's repressions. One month after the 1971 election, Kim fled Korea for Japan after a failed assassination attempt. In Japan, Kim continued his political activity as the exiled leader of his party. He regularly issued statements criticizing Park's dictatorship especially following imposition of the new Yushin Constitution in October 1972.

Fearing that even in exile Kim represented a serious political threat, Park ordered the KCIA to carry out another assassination attempt despite his being on Japanese soil. Under Park, the KCIA functioned as a Korean Gestapo. They carried out arbitrary arrest, torture, and murder of anyone suspected of political opposition to the South Korean capitalist regime. Most of the repressions targeted left-wing students and anyone with ties to socialist movements.

In Tokyo, Kim had begun organizing a coalition of exiled Korean organizations in Japan to continue building political opposition to Park's regime. With the assistance of the yakuza organized crime syndicate, the KCIA arranged for an entire floor of the hotel in Tokyo where Park was meeting with the other exiled political leaders to be emptied out.

After walking out of the meeting Kim was grabbed by KCIA agents, who forced him into another room, and drugged him. Kim was then transported to western Japan where he was put aboard a boat that sailed into the Sea of Japan, towards Korea.

Kim would later recall that his hands and feet were tied and bound with weights, making him believe that his kidnappers intended to drown him in the ocean. This likely would have been the outcome, however when the US Ambassador to South Korea learned of the kidnapping he met with Park and ordered him to stop the killing. Well aware of the movements and locations of the KCIA agents, the US military dispatched a helicopter to fly over the boat to make sure that the operation was carried out according to their instructions.

Having fully backed and help prepare Park's dictatorship, the American government opposed the murder not for Kim's sake, but out of fear that news of his murder would spark an uprising in the country. They also regarded Kim as a useful asset for the future—an assessment that turned out to be fully vindicated in the course of a

long political career that included a term as president, in which he loyally served the interests of American imperialism.

For more on this subject, see: Former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung dies

75 years ago: Pakistani state violently attacks Pashtun opposition group

On August 12, 1948, soldiers and police of the newly formed Pakistani state violently attacked an opposition protest in the rugged North-West Frontier Province of the country, largely populated by the Pashtun minority which is also the largest ethnic group in neighboring Afghanistan. The toll of the attack, which involved live-fire, remains contested. Proponents of the Pashtun organization that was targeted have claimed that at least 150 protesters were killed, but the Pakistani government asserts 15 died and another 40 were injured.

The attack, dubbed the Babra massacre after the field in which it was perpetrated, took place in the context of the recent partition of the Indian subcontinent. Faced with a mass anti-colonial movement, and emerging from World War II greatly weakened, British imperialism had agreed to formally relinquish its chief colonial possession of India. In a final onslaught on the masses, it conspired with the native ruling elites to divide the country into a Muslim-based Pakistan in the northwest and east and a predominately Hindu India.

The August 1947 partition claimed up to two million lives and displaced as many as 20 million. It led to ongoing fighting between Pakistani and Indian armed forces, as well as intense conflicts inside the newly formed states.

The target of the Babra massacre was the Khudai Khidmatgar movement, also known as the “red shirts” due to their attire. It was based among Pashtun tribal people in the north-west, near the Afghan border. While slow to become involved in politics, they had been drawn into the anti-British upsurge in the 1930s. The movement was led by Abdul Ghaffar Khan. While a practicing Muslim, he denounced communal divisions.

Khan opposed partition. While its most aggressive local proponent was the Muslim League, which would go on to dominate Pakistan, the Hindu-dominated Indian National Congress also acceded to the plan and sought to secure the most favorable division for itself. Khan denounced this as a betrayal, declaring: “you have thrown us to the wolves.”

He would issue a demand that if partition were to proceed, the Pashtuns have the right to establish their own independent state, or to enter into the state of Afghanistan, rather than to join Pakistan. This was rejected by the British and the Muslim League.

In 1948, after Pakistan was established, the Muslim League government cracked down on Khan’s movement. This included dissolving a North-West Frontier Province government in which his supporters played a prominent role. The new government effectively illegalized Khudai Khidmatgar, jailing its leaders and banning its activities. The Babra massacre occurred at a protest by supporters of the movement against these attacks.

100 years ago: Cuno government in Germany falls

On August 12, 1923, Wilhelm Cuno resigned as German Chancellor after a vote of no confidence initiated by the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Cuno, the first German chancellor who had no party affiliation, formed a center-right government after being appointed in November 1922, by President Friedrich Ebert (SPD), made up of the German People’s Party, German Democratic Party, German Center Party and Bavarian People’s Party.

Cuno was chancellor in one of the most volatile periods of German and world history. By the time he arrived in office, Europe had gone through the slaughter of World War I and the Russian Revolution of 1917. Germany itself had experienced a military defeat in 1918 by Allied imperialism and the humiliating Treaty of Versailles afterwards, two abortive revolutions in 1918 and 1919, an attempted far-right coup in 1920 and the vast growth of the German Communist Party.

In January 1923, under Cuno’s chancellorship, the French military had invaded the industrial Ruhr Valley to exact war reparations from the country. Germany then experienced uncontrollable hyperinflation. There were massive strikes, terrorist attacks in the Ruhr Valley and a developing revolutionary situation.

A meeting of the Reichstag on August 9 had begun to debate the viability of the Cuno government. It was besieged by delegations of workers and news came of more strikes and a mass demonstration in Chemnitz calling on Cuno to resign. As the debate proceeded the next day, a leading Communist member of the Reichstag called for a “mass movement of the working people to go forward, over the head of parliament, to form a workers’ revolutionary government.”

Strikes and mass meetings continued over the next days. Factory committees were formed throughout the country which included the most militant Social Democratic workers as well as Communist and non-party workers. The Social Democratic leaders were frantically trying to hold the working class tide back while the Communist International was urging the German Communists to make plans for an insurrection.

Over 30 people died in clashes across Germany on August 12 as Cuno resigned and the Social Democratic leaders installed a new grand coalition government in which the SPD participated. Strikes largely died down in the next few days but this was only a temporary respite for the German ruling class.



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