

# India-Pakistan Border Continues To Be Tense

by Ramtanu Maitra

Imposing constraints on militant outfits and extremist religious organizations, Pakistan's government is said to have detained more than 150 activists of the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET) and the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JEM). Foreign Office spokesman Aziz Ahmed Khan and Presidential Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Rashid Quereshi have gone out of their way to emphasize that the arrests have no connection to pressure from either the United States or India.

On the ground, however, it is evident that intense diplomatic pressure by China and the United States, in particular, and by New Delhi's mobilization for a full-scale war, has forced Pakistan President Gen. Pervez Musharraf to take decisive action against the two groups. Although some Indian and Pakistani high-level officials met over the week of the New Year, dialogue between the two nations has not begun. Nepali Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba is reportedly trying to organize a meeting between Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and President Musharraf at the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in Nepal's capital, Kathmandu, but the threat of war, triggered by miscalculations on either side, persists.

## Islamabad Detains Terrorists

The Jan. 2 *New York Times* reported that President Musharraf has ordered the wing of the military's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) that deals exclusively with the armed groups that Pakistan backs in Kashmir, shut down. In the future, Pakistan will limit its backing for the "Kashmir freedom struggle" to groups such as the Hizbul Mujahideen, which has its roots in Kashmir, and rely on Kashmiris to conduct military operations, the paper said, quoting officials in Islamabad.

The Dec. 13 attack on the Indian Parliament in New Delhi by five terrorists had brought the already-tense India-Pakistan relations to a new low. India claimed that the terrorists belonged to the Pakistan-based terrorist groups JEM and LET. Subsequently, India moved almost 300,000 troops and missiles close to its Pakistan border, indicating its readiness to go to full-scale war unless Pakistan stops "cross-border terrorism" immediately. Rejecting the Indian allegations initially as "baseless," Islamabad, under intense pressure from the United States, China, European Union members, and other nations, has arrested the JEM and the LET chiefs and has begun to round up terrorist members belonging to various jihadi outfits.

President Musharraf's move to detain the terrorists drew lukewarm response, even within Pakistan. Siddiq Farooq, an official with the Pakistan Muslim League, the second-largest political party, told the Jan. 2 *Washington Post* that he is not sure that Musharraf is sincere in his effort. He said that the groups would re-emerge in one form or another, because "these groups are the result of the unresolved issue of Kashmir. . . . If you don't attend to these fundamental questions, then you are just clutching at straws."

Notwithstanding, Musharraf has enunciated harsh measures to discipline thousands of madrassas (Islamic schools), which have been training nearly 500,000 students in fundamentalism every year for the last two decades. The madrassas must now register with the government, submit their accounts for audit, and introduce science and other subjects to modernize their curriculum.

Meanwhile, India has submitted to Pakistan a list of 20 individuals who have committed "terrorist acts" against India and are hiding in Pakistan. New Delhi is demanding extradition of these terrorists. Pakistan has not acquiesced to the demand, but Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar said on Jan. 1 that Islamabad would consider the extradition of wanted persons under the SAARC Anti-Terrorism Convention, if India meets the legal obligations, such as the indictment of the people demanded. "We can consider the extradition of these persons only after India fulfills all the legal requirements," Sattar told Pakistani journalists.

## Threat Of Military Hostilities

While carrying out the remedial measures, Islamabad has made it clear that it would not lag behind New Delhi's military escalation along the border, and has moved a large number of troops from the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, where they had been deployed to intercept al-Qaeda and Taliban militants trying to escape the American and Afghan dragnet and sneak into Pakistan. Withdrawal of Pakistani troops did not meet with Washington's approval, as it undermined American efforts to crush al-Qaeda and capture the Arab terrorist Osama bin Laden and the Taliban chief Mullah Mohammad Omar.

While the pressure on Pakistan to clamp down on the terrorists and prevent war is intense, India is also facing diplomatic pressures from all quarters to lower its war hysteria.

Because both India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons, active efforts to move toward a diplomatic resolution of problems is widely sought. However, it is still too early to forecast a systematic winding down of the tension toward an overall improvement in bilateral relations between these two long-feuding nations. Reports from the front indicate that India is not willing to ease military pressure quickly. The Indian Army is deploying more troops along the Kashmir borders with Pakistan as part of a military blueprint to hold strategic frontier posts through the bitter Himalayan Winter, officials said. Armory and logistical support, in the form of heavy weaponry, food convoys, and medical units are also being brought forward toward the volatile Line of Control separating India-

and Pakistan-held Kashmir.

Whether New Delhi can stave off military confrontation, is a matter of on how short a leash Islamabad can keep the terrorists. Reports of fresh attacks by militants, identified by New Delhi as Hizbul Mujahideen, on a police post at Srinagar in Kashmir, indicate that the militants are not ready to give up their option. The attack comes in the wake of reports that the JEM and the Hizbul Mujahideen had threatened fresh attacks on Jan. 1. Earlier, a local newspaper reported that JEM spokesman Abu Hijira has asked militants to carry out lethal attacks on Indian military and paramilitary installations in the coming days.

At the same time, arrest of the terrorists by Islamabad has been welcomed by New Delhi as a “step in the right direction.” Prime Minister Vajpayee has extended a “hand of alliance” to the Pakistan leadership if the latter sincerely joins the international community in its war against terrorism. In his “musings” on the eve of the New Year, Vajpayee said that if Pakistan has made a sincere U-turn, then he would want to tell the rulers in Islamabad: “Shed your anti-India mentality and take effective steps to stop cross-border terrorism, and you will find India willing to walk more than half the distance to work closely with Pakistan to resolve, through dialogue, any issue, including the contentious issue of Jammu and Kashmir.”

In response, Pakistani Foreign Office spokesman Aziz Ahmed Khan said that if the Indian Prime Minister’s intention was to restart dialogue, Pakistan welcomed it. “We have always stood for talks. We welcome if he is thinking of restarting the dialogue which was broken in Agra,” he said, referring to the India-Pakistan summit talks last Summer in the Indian city of Agra.

### **International Leaders Weigh In**

Talking to reporters at his ranch in Texas on Dec. 31, U.S. President George Bush said that he appreciated Musharraf’s action against leaders of terrorist outfits accused of attacks in India. “The fact that the Pakistani President is after terrorists is a good sign,” Bush said. British Prime Minister Tony Blair was scheduled to begin a diplomatic mission in the region in early January. Blair was to urge restraint by both Islamabad and Delhi, and prod them to resume their dialogue, according to information from Downing Street. President Bush called Blair on Jan. 2, to discuss how they could work together to help reduce tensions between India and Pakistan, the White House said.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan said that the two leaders, who spoke by telephone on Dec. 29, also discussed Blair’s trip to the region. “It was part of the ongoing discussion about the ways our two nations can work together to help reduce tensions,” McClellan said.

Words of caution and restraint have been issued by Beijing to both India and Pakistan on a number of occasions during the crisis build-up. Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan has spoken to the foreign ministers of both countries, urging them

to exercise “utmost restraint.” Tang said that the conflict between the two countries could destabilize the entire region.

President Musharraf, who had already made a Dec. 20-24 state visit to China, was expected to make a stop in Beijing on his way to Kathmandu to attend the seven-nation SAARC summit on Jan. 4. He is expected to meet Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji and discuss the regional situation. Zhu will be visiting India during January.

### **Ideological Problems**

Meanwhile, Islamabad has indicated that it is working toward breaking the diplomatic deadlock with India. Seeking some more time, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar told the *Times of India*, in Kathmandu, that Islamabad is willing to address India’s concerns and demands, following the terrorist attack on Parliament, to ensure that the two countries resume dialogue at the earliest. This is the first time in recent days that a high-level Pakistani official has made such a conciliatory gesture. He also told the daily that the present state of India-Pakistan relations is a cause for “great anxiety,” and the danger that hostilities could escalate due to “miscalculations,” could not be ruled out.

Efforts to reduce India-Pakistan tensions became apparent late in 2001, when top Foreign Office bureaucrats of both nations met in Nepal. Later, Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh and his Pakistani counterpart, Abdul Sattar, met briefly in Kathmandu where President Musharraf and Prime Minister Vajpayee would be present for the 11th SAARC Heads of States Summit on Jan. 4. As we go to press, the Vajpayee-Musharraf meeting, recommended by a number of heads of state, remained a remote possibility.

According to some observers, the diplomatic deadlock may remain intact. Although Islamabad is cracking down on the terrorists, it is unlikely that Islamabad can fully satisfy New Delhi on the issue. The reason for such pessimism is that within the Pakistani military establishment exists a near unanimity on Kashmir. The government surely does not want to accuse the jihadis fighting the “war of liberation” against the Indian military, of being “extremists.” Some of these organizations, such as the JEM and Harkatul Mujahideen, are offshoots of the Sipah-e-Sahaba and have armed fighters in their ranks. They move easily from the mother organization to the branch, and vice versa. Sipah-e-Sahaba has achieved a dominant position for its ability to deploy armed men. It is also involved in many sectarian killings among Muslims within the country.

There are other reasons why the Pakistani establishment cannot reconcile to eliminating the terrorists. To begin with, Pakistan lost East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1971, battling an indigenous anti-Pakistan liberation movement, which was militarily backed by India. Pakistan has not forgotten that defeat, and the official policy of Islamabad since has been to make India “pay” for that humiliation. Islamabad’s prime objective, however, is to pry out Kashmir from New Delhi’s



*Indian army guns firing across the Line of Control in Kargil, Kashmir, as India moved 300,000 troops to its northwest borders, and Pakistan mobilized troops from its Afghan border. China, the United States, and European nations have all exerted great pressure for a settlement, particularly on Pakistan.*

grip (India has in its possession about 65% of Jammu and Kashmir). Since such an objective cannot be achieved through diplomatic means, nor through military intervention, Pakistan relies heavily on irregular warfare to “bleed” India and keep the Kashmir issue on the front burner.

Moreover, observers note that if Pakistan abandons the terrorists, and its irregular warfare against India, it will have to forsake the strategy it had adopted in the late 1980s following the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan. At the time, Islamabad helped to reorganize the multi-ethnic Arab terrorists—known as the Afghansi, trained in Afghanistan with modern light and medium weapons—and decided to use them to pressure India in Indian-held Kashmir. Abandoning this strategy, though it must, creates an existential crisis within the Pakistani military and intelligence structure.

### **A Chance To Restructure Pakistan’s Military**

New Delhi, on the other hand, considers the present to be an opportune time to push Pakistan into a corner and bring about a structural change in Pakistan’s military and intelligence hierarchy. New Delhi surmises that if such a change were to occur, it would cool off Kashmir, to India’s advantage, and might permanently de-fang Pakistan’s India-baiters.

There are other reasons why New Delhi has upped the ante. Pakistan has lost its Taliban allies in Afghanistan, which is now under the control of a coalition government, backed by Russia and Iran—both nations considered by New Delhi as friends. In addition, the majority of the Afghan coalition government’s members are “friends” of India, and have a strong anti-Pakistan bias.

Second, Pakistan’s direct links to the much-hated terrorist group in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda, headed by Osama bin Laden,

is no longer a matter of conjecture. That linkage between al-Qaeda and the Pakistani ISI is admitted openly by all major nations. New Delhi also believes that Pakistan will hoodwink the United States and smuggle the al-Qaeda terrorists and the Taliban militants into Pakistan. Islamabad’s objective, New Delhi believes, is to use these terrorists in Kashmir under a new umbrella organization. Indian intelligence sources claim that these sheltered terrorists, who have been uprooted from their seat of power by the “friends” of India, can be motivated, with the help of adequate amounts of cash, to carry out suicidal terrorist acts against India.

Third, India has a massive military superiority over Pakistan, and its lead is widening by the day. Indian military observers are confident that Pakistan will not indulge in a full-scale war against India while 6,000 U.S. troops are stationed inside Pakistan.

At the same time, New Delhi is worried about Washington and its agenda to fight terrorism. India has to face the harsh reality that the United States and the Western countries can jettison principled policies and conduct of foreign policy on grounds of their own expediencies. One such important agenda item, New Delhi believes, could be Washington’s interest in maintaining friendly relations with Pakistan, rather than pushing President Musharraf to dismantle the terrorist structure that exists within Pakistan and is deployed against India.

That view was reflected in Prime Minister Vajapayee’s statement to a gathering at the All-India Convention of the Arya Samaj, in Lucknow, on Jan. 2, when he said: “While Pakistan was siding with the U.S. in the global war against terrorism, it was fuelling terrorism in Kashmir, but we will not tolerate this any longer.”