



IDSS COMMENTARIES (78/2005)

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New Delhi Blasts: Targeting Peace in the Sub-continent.

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31 October 2005

On 29 October 2005, a series of near simultaneous explosions took place in the Indian capital city of New Delhi. So far about 61 persons have died in the explosions while hundreds have been hospitalized with serious injuries. Following the blasts, the security agencies have closed down most of the shopping areas in the city and advised the residents to avoid going to crowded places. The atmosphere of fear and uncertainty created by the explosions is sure to dampen the celebrations associated with Deepavali, one of the biggest Hindu festivals. However, the question that looms larger is how New Delhi is going to respond to the blasts especially in the context of the on-going peace process between India and Pakistan.

Even as a group called Inquilab (revolution) reportedly claimed responsibility for the attacks there could be no doubt that blasts were acts of planned and pre-mediated terrorism. This is borne out by the nature and the timing of the attacks. The blasts took place just ahead of Deepavali, which is to be followed by Id, the Muslims festival to mark the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. The attacks seem to have been designed to create disaffection during the festive season and to provoke a communal clash between the Hindus and Muslims not only in New Delhi but also elsewhere in the country. The perpetrators would have expected disproportionate reaction from the Indian government as well similar to the one after the terrorist attacks against the Indian Parliament in December 2001 when New Delhi's mobilization of its armed forces brought India and Pakistan to the brink of a major war. The latest explosions could have been meant to derail the ongoing peace process between India and Pakistan.

In this context three aspects bear consideration – sustainability of the peace process between India and Pakistan, Islamabad's crackdown on terrorist groups operating from Pakistan, and the impact of last month's earthquake in parts of both India and Kashmir.

The Peace Process:

With a series of progressive confidence building measures, India and Pakistan are moving ahead with the peace negotiations not only about the future of Kashmir, but also about other contentious bilateral issues. On both sides of the border, there appears to be much support for the peace process among both the political leadership as well as the citizens. But there are problems as well. While there is no unanimity about the future of Kashmir, there is also no consensus about who would be representing the interests of the people of Kashmir. Both India and Pakistan seem to have accepted All-Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC)- an amalgamation of 26 political social and religious organizations- to represent the views of the

people of Kashmir in the peace talks. However since its inception APHC has never been a united entity given the tensions between its pro-Pakistan, hard-line fundamentalist Islamist and moderate leaders. The leaders who constitute the conglomerate often speak in different voices and are mostly inconsistent on different issues. As on today, the rift between two major factions in APHC – one led by Syed Ali Shah Geelani, most radical of all separatists and the other by Maulvi Farooq representing the liberals is almost total. Groups such as Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), Laskar-e-Toiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) etc have on a number of occasions challenged APHC's claim to be the sole representative of the people of Kashmir and have taken sides in the creeping factionalism within APHC.

The biggest of the Kashmir jihad organizations, Hizbul Mujahideen is positively inclined to negotiating peace with India and is reportedly in touch with APHC leadership and Indian officials, to take part in the peace process. Other groups especially the LeT and JeM, appear not to be positively disposed to the confidence building measures between India and Pakistan. For example, during the inaugural bus service between Srinagar and Mujaffarabad in April 2005, militant groups issued death threats to people planning to travel on the buses and attacked the Tourist Reception Centre in Srinagar accommodating 24 passengers.

As the peace talks progresses, there is a probability that militant groups' representation would be from the United Jihad Council (UJC), an umbrella organization for Islamic militants in Pakistan. As HM holds the chairmanship of UJC, it is expected to use its influence on the others. In all probability however at least three groups could oppose talks with India – LeT, JeM and Al-badr Mujahideen. These groups have capabilities at varying degrees to create turmoil through terrorist acts. Of the three, LeT and JeM have proven capabilities to attack targets outside Kashmir. Even as the group Inquilab has claimed responsibility for the latest attacks, the involvement of LeT is strongly indicated. This is because of attacks conducted by the group in New Delhi, Mumbai and other parts of India in the past. Interestingly on 24 October 2005, a New Delhi court convicted 7 persons including a LeT militant - Mohammad Arif - for the December 2000 attack on the historic Red fort in New Delhi. The court found Arif guilty of waging war against India a charge that carries the death penalty. The court was scheduled to pronounce the sentence on the convictions on 29 October, when the blasts occurred. However the court deferred the sentencing to 31 October citing technical reasons. It may be possible that the attacks were planned as a response to the judgment.

Role of Pakistan:

Pakistan's contribution for the peace process to move forward has been rather substantive even though some would argue that Islamabad is doing what it is being told (read forced) to do by Washington. However, it is important to note that Pakistan understands the benefits of peace in the sub-continent. There is an increasing undercurrent of popular support for the government to settle disputes with India including that on Kashmir so that resources can be used to create wealth in the country. Over the last 3 years Pakistan has taken a number of steps to rein in the militant groups. An unfortunate by-product of this had been that Islamabad appears to have lost much control on the activities of these groups especially the ones fighting for liberation of Kashmir. Some of these groups even turned against President Musharraf as evidenced in a number of attempts against his life.

Impact of Earthquake:

Reports indicate that the earthquake, which killed about 60000 people in the sub-continent, also hit the militant's camps and offices in Kashmir and North West Frontier Provinces (NWFP). Preliminary estimates put the number of militants killed at about 1800. Though the impact of the damages to the training camps of the militant groups should not be over-estimated given the fragile nature of the infrastructure, in the short term, it may not be possible for the groups recoup their human and material losses. Besides, the militant groups such as LeT, Hizbul Mujahideen and Al-Badr Mujahideen are also active in the relief activities. Since the militant groups and their army handlers will now be totally absorbed in relief and rehabilitation efforts their operational capacity could be severely degraded. But on the Indian side of Kashmir, the militants could get opportunities to conduct attacks due to security lapse following the preoccupation of the security forces in earthquake relief. This was already evident in Kashmir when despite an order from UJC to suspend violence following the earthquake; militants attacked an Indian military convoy with a female suicide terrorist and also killed the education minister of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir on 13 and 18 October respectively. These attacks could mean that contrary to reports that a large number of militants were killed in the earthquake, the groups are still capable to conduct attacks in Kashmir and elsewhere.

It is now important that the violent tactics of the terrorists does not distract both New Delhi and Islamabad. Indian Prime Minister has clearly asserted that the terrorist attacks could not undermine New Delhi's resolve for peace. Pakistan has also strongly condemned the attacks in New Delhi. Most importantly, on the day of the blasts itself, despite provocations, both the countries went ahead and made an unprecedented agreement to open their respective borders to facilitate movement of people involved in earthquake relief and rehabilitation. This is indicative of their firm resolve that notwithstanding tragic loss of life, terrorists would not be able to derail the peace process between India and Pakistan.

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