

Will South Asia slide into war by miscalculation?

by Ramtanu Maitra and Linda de Hoyos

Since late December, U.S. President William Clinton has personally intervened twice to up the ante in the "human rights" campaign against India. On Dec. 27, the President signed two letters that caused consternation in Delhi, giving new impetus to the cause of an independent Kashmir and the Sikh separatist movement in Punjab, now mostly dormant. In so doing, the Clinton administration, anxious for a victory on the nuclear non-proliferation front in the wake of its December backdown on North Korea, is playing a dangerous game of escalating already high tensions between India and Pakistan.

Clinton's first missive went to Dr. Ghulam Nabi Fai, executive director of the Kashmiri-American Council based in Washington. The letter, which Fai scurried to fax worldwide, said: "I am looking forward to working with you and others to help bring peace to Kashmir. . . . I share your belief that, in order to face dilemmas in a post-Cold War landscape, we all must look closely at our policies with regard to human rights."

Fai, who has been a star performer at "human rights" conferences organized by British House of Lords member Lord Avebury, is a proponent of an independent Kashmiri nation, as opposed to simply joining India's section of Kashmir with Pakistan. Fai underlined that the letter "demonstrates that the President cares about human rights in Kashmir and is committed to helping all parties achieve a peaceful solution."

The day after Clinton signed the letter to Fai, Soviet President Boris Yeltsin dispatched a note to Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao expressing his concern for a "just solution" to the Kashmir crisis. This marked a turn-about for the Russians; during his January 1993 visit to Delhi, Yeltsin had said: "India must keep its integrity and keep united and we support its policy on Kashmir."

Clinton's second letter was sent to Rep. Gary A. Condit (D-Calif.) and pressed the case of Sikh rights. Clinton wrote: "I am aware of the chronic tensions between the Indian government and the Sikh militants, and share your desire for a peaceful solution that protects Sikh rights." Clinton noted that "the human rights abuses still occur in Punjab."

As soon as this letter was made public, Prakash Singh Badal, the Akali leader who urges a separate Khalistan be formed out of India's Punjab state, announced that he is planning a statewide "people's movement" march for the end of January.

This Clinton letter drew a response from New Delhi. An official of the Indian External Affairs Ministry stated, "We reject any statement that speaks of a solution that protects Sikh rights." He said the letter "cannot but have a negative impact on our bilateral relations;" and "comes in the wake of a series of negative pronouncements . . . by U.S. authorities on such issues as Kashmir, human rights, and Punjab." The letter on Punjab is particularly egregious for India, since the situation there is peaceful—with the Punjabi Sikh population having reviled the drug-terror mafia parading under the Khalistani banner. Thus, the spokesman said, "India rejects any statement that speaks of a solution that protects Sikh rights." Second, India's commitment to human rights and democracy is "axiomatic to India's existence. We do not accept external prescriptions in this regard."

U.S. interventions against India in the region had begun with the Oct. 28 pronouncement by Robin Raphel, assistant secretary of state for South Asian Affairs, that the United States considers all of Kashmir as disputed territory between India and Pakistan. The statement was an about-face for Washington, which had previously indicated its understanding that India and Pakistan would settle the dispute bilaterally. Instead, Raphel, implying backing for an independent Kashmir, a policy first pushed from London, said that no peaceful settlement could come to Kashmir "unless agreed to by the people of Kashmir."

Charging the atmosphere

The U.S. intervention made news in India soon after talks between Indian and Pakistan Jan. 3-4 which resulted in no progress on any outstanding issues. Sources in Delhi fear that Pakistan is prepared for no concessions on Kashmir and that India and Pakistan could slide into war over the next year. Although U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan John Monjo arrived back in Islamabad on Jan. 20 with a new package of proposals, he reportedly has linked a proposed trip by Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto to Washington with progress in Indo-Pakistani talks.

However, internally, Pakistan is not prepared for any concessions. In a strident announcement on nationwide TV Jan. 23, Bhutto said that the "resolution of the Kashmiri issue is the top-most agenda of my government's foreign policy. Kashmir is the jugular vein of Pakistan and the day is not far

when it will be a part of this country." She said Pakistan will push the U.N. Human Rights Commission in Geneva to "expose" Indian repression against Kashmiris, and called upon all Pakistanis to observe a strike on Feb. 5 to show resolve for a plebiscite in the Kashmir Valley.

Pakistani vehemence on the issue had formerly been heightened by the statements of Pakistan Foreign Minister Sardar Assef Ali Jan. 8 during a visit to Uzbekistan. At a news conference, Sardar Assef declared, "Unless the Kashmir dispute is solved peacefully on the terms of international law and United Nations resolutions, there cannot be lasting peace in South Asia. And this time around, the concern of the world, the concern of South Asian countries and regional countries is that if a war takes place in South Asia, it might become a nuclear war."

Indeed, Pakistani military officials have indicated that if war breaks out, nuclear weapons will be the first option for Pakistan, given its inability to defeat India in a conventional war.

Threats echo the constant refrain from Washington that India and Pakistan are on the verge of nuclear war, and the Kashmir dispute is at the root of it. The United States is trying to force both India and Pakistan to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Ambassador Monjo's proposals to Pakistan for negotiations include considerations of "regional security," and according to Pakistani Foreign Secretary Shahrar Khan, "India is now talking about the whole gamut of the nuclear issue at the bilateral level."

But while the United States fans the insurgencies in India and boosts Pakistani hopes of U.S. backing, it is blackmailing Pakistan. A report by the House Republican Research Committee on "The Islamic International," charges that Pakistan's Interservices Intelligence (ISI) has aided terrorist-insurgent operations throughout India. The report charges that Pakistan offered to give all possible help to separatist insurgents in the northeastern Indian state of Manipur organized as the People's Liberation Army, funneling money and arms through Myanmar (Burma). The report also asserts that the most telling impact of the ISI was the emergence in summer 1992 of the United Islamic Liberation Army in northeast India, now the dominant subversive group against the government.

The charges revive the atmosphere of last spring, when the United States threatened to place Pakistan on the list of "terrorist" countries. The report charges the ISI, known to be financed by drug money and not accountable to the government, with a series of terrorist acts against India, including a bomb explosion at Delhi airport June 25, 1991, and bombs onboard an Air India plane Dec. 1, 1991. Among other goals, the report claims, the Pakistani ISI, working with the Indian Student Islamic Movement, wants to carry out sabotage and unleash a regime of terror that will cause panic and whip up communal passion.

Amid all the diplomatic pronouncements from Delhi, Islamabad, and Washington, on-the-ground tension is esca-

lating. On Jan. 19, Delhi police seized 150 kilograms of explosives from three Muslims, who later said they were in touch with the ISI. The police claim that the plan was to set off explosions in Delhi on Republic Day, Jan. 26.

In Kashmir, a major gun battle broke out between Indian and Pakistani troops on Jan. 10 along the line of control in the Nowshera, injuring 12 soldiers on both sides. The gun battle took place immediately after a series of explosions in the Indian part of the Kashmir Valley, with Indian intelligence charging that the bombers had crossed the border from Pakistan and then returned. Meanwhile, the governor of Kashmir in India, Gen. K. V. Krishna Rao, has claimed that Pakistan is preparing to send more than 10,000 Afghan mujahideen into the Kashmir Valley to escalate the violence.

India was also keen to note a U.S.-Pakistani joint military exercise in early January for high-altitude training in the rugged mountains of Peshawar, involving 150 U.S. commandos.

There is no question that a war between India and Pakistan could occur by miscalculation, in an atmosphere fraught with diplomatically devised alternating provocative and conciliatory statements on both sides, and with intervention from Washington. In pressing for advantage, it is easy for things to get out of control, as the following story from the Indian press indicates.

Dr. Sohan Singh, a mastermind of the Khalistani movement, was recently arrested and told investigators that in 1990, there was discussion between the Khalistanis, militant Muslims, and Afghan mujahideen leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar to set up "Radio Khalistan" in Afghanistan and that Hekmatyar would ensure that Khalistani terrorists would have sanctuary in Hekmatyar-controlled areas of Afghanistan. Then-Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and then-President Ghulam Ishaq Khan agreed to the scheme. However, then-Pakistani Army chief Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg pointed out that the tension between India and Pakistan was already very high, and that India was already accusing Pakistan of carrying out a proxy war in Punjab. Beg reportedly argued that if Khalistanis were allowed to set up shop in Hekmatyar territory, India would open up a front and full-scale war would become inevitable.

One thing is certain: If the Kashmir and other disputes are to be resolved, they will have to be negotiated in a different framework from that provided by the United States, with its emphasis on non-proliferation of nuclear technology and "market democracies." The Mideast accords, based on mutual agreement for regional economic development as long proposed by U.S. statesman Lyndon LaRouche, is the only possible route to solve the Kashmir dispute. Such an accord fashioned around economic development would necessarily involve not only India and Pakistan, but also Iran and the newly independent states of Central Asia. It also provides the only possible route to resolving the years-long war in Afghanistan.