

India ratchets up tensions with Pakistan over Mumbai attack

By Peter Symonds
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The Indian government launched a diplomatic offensive against Pakistan this week, with a dossier linking the Pakistan-based Islamist organisation Lashkar-i-Taiba (LeT) to the Mumbai terrorist attacks. While none of the evidence links the Pakistani government or its agencies to the operation, Indian leaders accused Islamabad of involvement and indicated that military action was not ruled out.

Announcing on Monday that New Delhi had handed over the dossier to Pakistan, Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon told the media that it "beggars the imagination" that no one in the Pakistani establishment knew about the preparations for the Mumbai attacks. New Delhi has been demanding that Pakistan thoroughly investigate and hand over suspects for trial in India.

The following day, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh sounded an even more strident note, declaring: "There is enough evidence to show that, given the sophistication and military precision of the attack, it must have had the support of some official agencies in Pakistan." He did not name any agency, but the Indian political and media establishment routinely blames the Pakistani military's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) for terrorist acts in India.

A leaked copy of the document has been published in full on the *Hindu* website. The newspaper's strategic affairs editor Siddharth Varadarajan concluded that the dossier "certainly... does not contain material which substantiates this [Singh's] belief" and warned that India was letting Pakistan off the hook by overplaying its hand.

The dossier contains photographs of weapons and other items captured, details extracted from GPS equipment, selected transcripts of phone conversations and a few details from the interrogation of the

surviving attacker, Mohammed Ajmal Kasab. It concludes that the LeT was responsible for the attacks in Mumbai, but makes no mention of the Pakistani government, military or state bureaucracy.

India is clearly exploiting the Mumbai violence to intensify pressure on its long-time regional rival and to enlist international support, particularly from the US, for its demands. The dossier has been handed to "friendly governments" and details leaked to the media. While both countries have played down the threat of war, the danger remains that tensions can rapidly escalate as happened following the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament in 2001.

Indian Defence Minister A.K. Anthony and Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee both repeated the refrain on Wednesday that "all options"—that is, including the military one—remain on the table. Accusing Pakistan of failing to dismantle terrorist groups, Anthony declared that "we are examining all possible available options." The phrase refers to the barely disguised debate in India's political and military establishment over the launching of military strikes against alleged "terrorist training camps" inside Pakistan—a move that could rapidly lead to all out-war between the two countries.

Facing national elections this year, the Congress-led government in New Delhi is under pressure from the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party to take a tougher stance against Pakistan. BJP spokesman Prakash Javadekar on Monday branded the government's response as a political "bail-out plan" for Pakistan. Two days later, BJP party chief Rajnath Singh offered the party's support for a military offensive against Pakistan.

Significantly, the Samajwadi Party on Thursday threatened to review its support for the United Progressive Alliance government in four or five days if

it failed to take action against terrorists in Pakistan.

"We are not for action against the people of Pakistan, but the terrorist camps must be dismantled. The government must satisfy us on this," general secretary Amar Singh said. The government depended on the populist Samajwadi Party to survive a key parliamentary vote last July.

At the same time, New Delhi is under pressure from Washington not to escalate tensions with Islamabad. While demanding that the Pakistani government take tougher measures against terrorism, the US is above all concerned that the Pakistani military continue its operations on the border with Afghanistan to suppress anti-US insurgents and help stabilise the US-led occupation of that country. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher visited both countries this week to encourage cooperation, cautiously praising Islamabad for detaining key LeT figures, while declaring there was still "a long way to go".

Under the Bush administration, India has forged close economic and strategic ties with the US. However, the failure of Washington to back Indian military threats against Pakistan, even as the US carries out its own air attacks inside Pakistani border areas and gives carte blanche to Israel in its onslaught on Gaza, has generated an undercurrent of resentment in Indian ruling circles and calls for a more independent stance.

Former Indian ambassador to Pakistan, G. Parthasarathy, told *Time* this week: "No country will fight your battle for you. Just see the contrast between India's response to Mumbai and Israel's in Gaza. We have to remember that the US is itself heavily dependent on Pakistan for logistics in Afghanistan. And if India really has evidence to link the ISI to the Mumbai attacks, the US will not help us go down that path at all."

Pakistan has bluntly rejected the latest Indian allegations and demands. A foreign ministry statement declared: "Instead of responding positively to Pakistan's offer of cooperation and constructive proposals, India has chosen to embark on a propaganda offensive... Vilifying Pakistan, or for that matter any of its state institutions, on this score is unwarranted and unacceptable." It warned that the approach was "fraught with grave risks".

In the wake of the Mumbai atrocity, the Pakistan government offered a joint investigation, which was

rejected by India, and detained a number of LeT figures. But it has repeatedly rejected Indian accusations that Pakistani officials were involved in the attacks and insisted that India provide evidence before acknowledging that any of the attackers were Pakistani citizens.

The Mumbai attacks have heightened existing tensions within the Pakistani political establishment, fuelled by its support for the widely-despised US occupation of Afghanistan as well as the country's economic crisis. Like their Indian counterparts, the Pakistani ruling elites invariably respond to deepening social tensions by whipping up communalism and the threat posed by their regional rival. Under such circumstances, anything that smacks of a concession to India carries a high political risk.

The frictions within the government became evident on Wednesday, when Prime Minister Yousak Raza Gilani summarily sacked the country's national security adviser Mahmood Durrani after he confirmed to an Indian television station that the surviving Mumbai attacker was a Pakistani citizen. A statement from Gilani's office accused Durrani of "irresponsible behaviour" and making an unauthorised announcement. Information minister Sherry Rehman has since confirmed that Mohammed Aajmal Kasab was a Pakistani civilian.

The sacking appears to be the result of political feuding between Gilani and President Asif Ali Zardari who appointed Durrani, a retired army general and former ambassador to Washington. According to some commentators, the Pakistani military has been pushing for the dismissal of Durrani, who is viewed as too conciliatory toward India and the US.

With neither government in a position to compromise, the danger of an escalation in the confrontation between the two nuclear-armed powers continues.

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