

Foreign powers behind Gandhi assassination?

by Ramtanu Maitra

Indian Home Minister S.B. Chavan's July 26 statement that the one-man commission of inquiry on the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi would be expanded, indicates that the two-month-old effort to find out who killed the former prime minister has hit a brick wall. The government's attempt to blame the militant Tamil Tigers from Sri Lanka has failed, and Chavan's hint that foreign powers may have been involved in the assassination, given Gandhi's prominence as a Third World leader, opens a broader investigation.

Following the May 21 assassination of the Congress (I) president in the middle of India's 10th general election campaign, the media and Indian intelligence spokesmen pointed the finger at the Tamil Tigers. The motive, it was asserted, despite contrary indications, was a vendetta against the alleged brutalities committed by the Indian Peacekeeping Forces (IPKF) against the Tamils while stationed in Sri Lanka for two years in an attempt to bring peace between the warring Tamil secessionists and the Sri Lankan government forces. The Indian presence had been agreed upon in July 1987 by Gandhi and then-President Junius Jayewardene. The IPKF failed in its mission and came to be identified with the Sri Lankan government.

Despite clear evidence that the Tigers were aware that Rajiv Gandhi was likely to emerge the victor in national elections, and were opening a communication channel with him, the Tamil guerrillas were blamed. But after arresting some 2,000 Sri Lankan Tamils, including a number of "prime suspects," Indian authorities have not been able to clinch their case. The alleged mastermind of the killing, Sivarasan, has eluded the security net for more than two months, and a recent report indicates he was seen in Sikkim, a state in the Himalayas about 7,000 miles from the scene of the crime.

Meanwhile, a number of incidents in India have surprised authorities. The latest was the escape and death of V. Shanmugam, another "prime suspect," on July 20. Shanmugam, who had been arrested two days earlier, was found hanging from a tree near the bungalow in which he was imprisoned. In the words of a statement by the ruling Congress (I) members of parliament, the death of Shanmugam "has amply proved that the special investigative team (DIT) is neither capable, nor willing to conduct a sincere and proper investigation." Two days later, Defense Minister Sharad Pawar told newsmen in Pune that India will not tolerate attempts from outside to destabilize the country.

Pawar's statement came almost a month after a bizarre

incident in the Kashmir Valley where 40 Israelis, ostensibly tourists with arms training, were involved in a shootout with militant Kashmiris seeking separation from India. Since India and Israel have little in the way of diplomatic relations, the presence of the Israelis in the troubled Muslim majority state of Kashmir adjacent to Pakistan has raised the specter of yet another India-Pakistan war. The question is, who were these Israelis, why were they allowed into Kashmir, and what inroads has Israel made into the Indian political arena?

Israeli interest in the subcontinent

The incident in Kashmir confirms Israel's continuing interest in the region. It is widely known that the Mossad was involved in providing counterinsurgency training to the Sri Lankan Army in the 1980s. Later, Mossad agent Ostrovsky's exposé of Mossad activities indicated that the Israelis had trained both the Sri Lankan Army and the Tamil Tigers in the use of explosives. It is also a matter of speculation what the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the Zionist lobby in the United States, was up to when it took a high-level delegation to India in the mid-1980s.

Particularly since the Gulf war, the pro-Israel lobby in India has become extremely active. A number of former Army generals who joined the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) during the recent election campaign, have come out promising closer Indian-Israeli relations. Leading Indian strategic analysts, such as K. Subahmanyam, also suggest that to improve New Delhi-Washington relations, India must cozy up to Israel. The emergence of Rep. Steven Solarz (D-N. Y.) as the pro-India lobby in Washington is an indication that policymakers are proceeding along these lines.

India's sidling up to Israel, albeit covertly, makes Pakistan suspicious of India's intentions. The incident in the Kashmir Valley has evoked angry statements from top Pakistani officials, and it has worsened India-Pakistan relations at a time when the new prime ministers in India and Pakistan might otherwise have begun a dialogue to resolve bilateral matters peacefully. With the end of the Cold War, which kept India-Pakistan relations strained for decades, there is a real basis for progress.

Moreover, it is evident from Iranian Foreign Minister Akbar Velayati's remarks recently in Pakistan that the Islamic countries will not give up their support for the Kashmiri militants (see *International Intelligence*). The presence of Israeli "tourists" in Kashmir will predictably harden their stance.

Rajiv Gandhi was crucial to the stability of the subcontinent. He was emerging as a leading Third World political figure, and his murder has provided foreign powers the flexibility to operate on the subcontinent. The Israelis may well be involved in seducing the Indians to believe that they can solve the Kashmir problem and remove the nuclear threat from Pakistan, but they are most likely operating on orders from elsewhere.