

Militancy in Kashmir receives a setback

by Susan B. Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

The 31-day siege of the Hazratbal mosque, where some 80 armed Kashmiri militants had been holed up since Oct. 15 and surrounded by cordons set up by the Indian Army, came finally to a tame end, when all the militants came out of the shrine to surrender unconditionally, in the early morning of Nov. 16. Besides bringing relief to people across the country, the surrender vindicated the government's stance and provided the Army an opportunity to "break the back" of terrorists in Kashmir.

The long siege began when a member of the Muslim Aqaf Trust, in charge of the Hazratbal shrine, where a lock of the Prophet Mohammed's hair has been preserved since the Mogul days, told the Jammu and Kashmir police chief that the militants inside the shrine were tampering with the locks leading to the holy relic. On the order of Kashmir Police Chief A.K. Suri, the security adviser to the state governor sent two companies of paramilitary forces to close off all the exits and entries leading to the shrine and cordoned off the place. Later the Army took over from the paramilitary units, and Army Chief Gen. B.C. Joshi himself oversaw the setting up of the siege. While the siege continued and negotiations with the militants began, the Army positioned its men in strategic locations, making it clear that the shrine would be stormed if any attempt was made by the militants inside to damage the shrine, or in the event that they started killing each other.

Government under fire

The siege began about three weeks before the first of the five Indian states, including the largest state of Uttar Pradesh, was due for state assembly elections. Immediately, the siege became an election issue exploited mostly by the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Hindu chauvinist national party, and hostile, anti-government media. The magazine *India Today*, which had consistently opposed the government's position and even glorified the terrorism of the Kashmiri militants, called it "Operation Blunder" and accused the government of turning the siege into a contentious international issue in order to capture some 40 second-rank guerrillas. The magazine accused the government of allowing the militants to turn the shrine into an armed fortress.

Besides the hostile media, individuals and groups who differ with Delhi's hardline approach to the Kashmiri mili-

tants over the last four years came out in support of lifting the siege and allowing the militants to leave peacefully. One such group, the All-Party Hurriyat Conference, a Kashmiri group formed last summer to open negotiating channels between government authorities and the terrorists, began to negotiate with the government's permission. However, on Oct. 19, APHC chief Abdul Gani Lone demanded in a letter addressed to U.N. Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali that a fact-finding mission be sent to Kashmir, which he claimed was never a part of India. Later, Lone was arrested for organizing a rally in Srinagar, with the intent of marching to the shrine to break the Army cordon. Following his release, Lone complained that he was tortured by Indian security personnel. At that point, surprising everyone, the U.S. State Department went out of its way to inquire about Lone's welfare, and the U.S. Embassy in Delhi actually sent a staffer to meet with him.

The mystery about the U.S. administration's interest in Lone was cleared up later, when U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs Robin Lynn Raphel admitted that the United States has been in touch with Lone for the last 18 months.

On Oct. 29, Raphel, throwing caution to the winds, told amazed journalists that the United States had never accepted the instrument of accession by which the Maharajah of Kashmir had agreed to join the Indian Union in 1947. After this statement was broadcast, the militants raised fresh slogans and called off their talks.

Muslim reaction

During the entire period of the siege, except for those Kashmiris who masquerade as moderates while providing full support to the Kashmiri militants, Indian Muslims made no attempt to identify the issue as a Muslim issue. No major Islamic group questioned Delhi's intent or organized any major rally against the siege anywhere in the country. Imams also kept away from inciting the community.

However, the same cannot be said about the reactions of the two neighboring Islamic countries—Pakistan and Bangladesh. Pakistan's new prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, in her second non-consecutive term, lost no time in condemning Indian authorities for clamping down the siege and sent letters to world leaders to press India on the issue. At the U.N. General Assembly, the Pakistani representative and former ambassador to Washington, Jamshed Marker, reiterated what Raphel had told journalists in Washington. "Kashmir is the unfinished business of the partition of Pakistan and India," Marker told the UNGA. Elsewhere, a crowd of 2,000 in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad chanted "*jihad, jihad*," and marched to the Indian High Commission to express their anger. In Bangladesh, Foreign Secretary Reaz Rahman, at a press conference on Oct. 30, expressed "concern" over the situation in Kashmir and announced that "Bangladesh does not support use of arms at any place of worship."