

This Isn't Posturing - We're On The Brink Of A Nuclear War

Daily Telegraph 31/05/2002

By Ahmed Rashid/Islamabad

Jack Straw's departure from the Indian sub-continent - without securing concessions from either Pakistan or India - has left the situation where it stood on his arrival: the prospect of war and peace still hangs in the balance. India may launch punitive air attacks and commando raids against the camps of Kashmiri and Pakistani militants based in Azad or Pakistani Kashmir. Pakistan would retaliate against army bases in Indian Kashmir.

After weeks of fighting, with neither side being able to claim an advantage in the high mountainous terrain and as both become bogged down in raids and counter-raids across the disputed Line of Control, one side may attempt to break the logjam by crossing the international border and launching an invasion. Yesterday's cross-border shelling and the attack by Islamic militants on an Indian police station is another step towards war.

Or India may carry out a naval blockade of Pakistan's only artery to the outside world - the port of Karachi. India's huge advantage in troops and armour would quickly win it territory, which may force a desperate Pakistani military to use missile-launched tactical nuclear weapons on Indian forces.

The 55-year dispute over Kashmir, a legacy of the partition of British India in 1947, has led to two wars, many crises, military mobilisations, threats and counter-threats, which have lulled the international community into believing that this is an oft-repeated shadow dance. In fact, never has the situation been so fraught with danger as it is now.

The world is changed after September 11 and the international war against terrorism. India is furious that the world has ignored Pakistan-based Islamic extremists, who continued with their bloody terrorism in India and Kashmir even after September 11. India says it cannot join the world in fighting al-Qa'eda when the world ignores these attacks on its own soil. At the same time India believes that it can ignore the plight of the Kashmiri people, who have suffered 40,000 dead over the past 12 years of conflict. So India has used the global war on terrorism to push back dialogue with the Kashmiris.

Pakistan's military regime believed that it could comfortably carry out a U-turn on its support of the Taliban and join the US alliance to topple them, while the world and India would turn away from Islamabad's support for Kashmiri and Pakistani militants, who have turned the Kashmiris' genuine political struggle for self-determination into a jihad. The army's refusal to understand how much the world had changed after September 11 and its failure to offer anything other than militancy and terrorism in Kashmir gave India just the opportunity it sought to deal finally with Pakistan.

President Pervaiz Musharraf divides militants into three camps: al-Qa'eda and the Taliban; the sectarian extremists inside the country who have butchered thousands of innocent Pakistanis; and the "freedom fighters" of Kashmir. The world has now told him forcefully that there are no such distinctions. The Pakistani militant groups that fight in Kashmir also fought for the Taliban and al-Qa'eda in Afghanistan. The 29 Arab al-Qa'eda operatives arrested in Pakistani cities last month were being given sanctuary and safe houses by the largest Pakistani group fighting in Kashmir. All these groups are now closely interlinked, no matter how the Pakistani state tries to differentiate between them.

The Pakistan military's poor tactics have now turned the world against Pakistan. India has won the international community to its side and isolated Pakistan - but that has not made it amenable to de-escalating tensions, as there is a wider agenda. The hardline Hindu fundamentalist wing of the ruling BJP party has long argued that Pakistan has to be militarily beaten, so that it never again rises to question India's hegemony in South Asia. For them, the issue is not merely terrorism, but beating Pakistan into a final submission.

To his credit, the moderate Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has twice taken major initiatives to talk to Pakistan. His inability to succeed has led to a strengthening of the Hindu fundamentalist wing. The BJP's recent electoral defeats in regional elections and the killing of some 2,000 Muslims in Gujarat state by Hindu fundamentalists

have further weakened Mr Vajpayee's influence on the New Delhi power-brokers.

Gen Musharraf is also on the ropes. Last month's rigged referendum making him president for the next five years, fears of a rigged general election in October and the army's unwillingness to share real power with civilians have turned all the major political parties against him and continued army rule. For the first time in Pakistan's history, and with the experience of three wars with India, people are not rallying around the army to defend the motherland, but are demanding Gen Musharraf's resignation. Many people in both countries believe that he and the BJP would prefer the diversion of a limited war to the continued weakening of their political positions at home.

Meanwhile, the trivialisation of nuclear war by both armies and their macho ideologies - jihad and martyrdom on the one side, Hindu fundamentalism on the other - coupled with the elite's refusal to educate their public about the horrors of nuclear conflict, only add to the dangers. Many Pakistanis think a nuclear bomb just makes a bigger bang than an ordinary one.

So all these factors have come together to produce a crisis which is unprecedented, even in the constantly crisis ridden sub-continent. The danger of war is greater than it has ever been.

No one side is seeing the logic of a climb-down. And so enormous is the lack of communication between the two sides that anything could spark a conflict - a missile test gone wrong, another terrorist attack or a macho junior officer on the Line of Control wanting to teach his opponent a lesson. The need for international intervention has never been greater, not just to prevent a war but to force the two sides finally to resolve the Kashmir dispute