

India's 'No' on Troops To Iraq May Be Catching

by Ramtanu Maitra

India's Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) made the official announcement on July 14: India will not send troops to help America and Britain "stabilize" and rule Iraq. Although the CCS reached the decision in 10 minutes, the issue had been hanging fire for weeks, and was the subject of hectic diplomatic activities between New Delhi and Washington.

The issue had also divided, however temporarily, the most important members of the BJP-led coalition government of India. Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister L.K. Advani, who is considered by some, particularly in Washington, as the "prime minister-in-waiting," had indicated during his recent trip to the United States that when facts were laid on the table, those in India who opposed troop deployment in Iraq, would fall in line. According to India's news daily the *Statesman*, National Security Council Advisor Brajesh Mishra, while visiting the United States in early May, had told the Bush Administration that India would comply with Washington's request to send a division of the Indian army, totaling almost 17,000 troops.

But, on July 14, it became evident that Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had made up his mind long ago not to send the troops. The whole exercise was to bring debate out in the open, and make all viewpoints known. The Prime Minister was also in communication with the opposition leader and Congress Party president, Sonia Gandhi. Mrs. Gandhi had warned the Prime Minister on June 4 not to send the troops to Iraq "under any arrangement other than a UN command or as part of a multinational peace keeping force that has the explicit mandate of the UN." At the CCS meeting, reports indicate that both Advani and Mishra fell in line with the Vajpayee's views. It is evident that quiet prime ministerial assertiveness had its impact on the collective thinking.

Pakistani Deployment May Be Affected

The U.S. response to New Delhi's decision was reserved. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said, "It is a decision that each country needs to make on its own depending on its interests and its concerns about the situation in Iraq." Although he made it a point to say the decision would not affect relations between Washington and New Delhi, he made clear that "there are ample grounds in [UN] Resolution 1483 which encourage countries to participate in stabilization." At least one Indian newspaper reported that in private, State Department officials have indicated that they were not happy



Prime Minister Vajpayee speaking in Kolkata on July 16; he had wisely shaped a long process of debate toward a refusal of the U.S. request for 17,000 Indian troops.

with the Indian decision.

While New Delhi's acceptance to send Indian troops under the U.S.-U.K. occupation of Iraq was considered by observers as a long-shot, just the act of bringing Indian troops to Iraq would have been considered a major success for American diplomacy. Besides having a major nation on its side, the United States could have prevailed upon other nations, particularly the Muslim nations in Asia and Africa, to send troops. Although Pakistani President Gen. Pervez Musharraf has agreed in principle to send 6,000-10,000 troops to Iraq, the Indian decision may trigger fresh opposition within Pakistan, and block the deployment. A similar situation may develop in another South Asian Islamic nation, Bangladesh; and Washington may find it difficult to get troops from any of the South Asian countries.

The Indian refusal, on the other hand, may intensify American pressure on other nations. According to a Lebanese newspaper, *Al-Kifah al-Arabi*, which quoted "Arab diplomatic sources" in a July 14 report from Cairo, President George W. Bush insisted at the Sharm el-Sheikh summit in June, that Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia send troops to Iraq as part of an international force to maintain security in Iraqi towns, to prevent U.S. soldiers coming under attack from Iraqi resistance fighters. The newspaper said Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak told Bush that it would be difficult for him to comply; Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah asked for time to think; and King Abdullah II of Jordan agreed, on condition that other Arab countries also contribute forces.

It is evident that the weeks of deliberations in New Delhi were choreographed carefully. India used them as an excuse to find out what Iraq's neighbors are thinking about the Anglo-American occupation. Indian emissaries visited Jordan, Turkey, Syria, the U.A.E., Saudi Arabia, Iran, and others, to get their evaluation of how things are shaping up in Iraq. Turkey, Syria, and Iran told New Delhi not to send troops. This could be interpreted as their signal that things will remain messy,

and they do not want a friendly nation to get embroiled. Among those who wanted to see Indian troops in Iraq, were the Gulf emirates.

New Delhi, however, was careful not to antagonize Washington by rejecting the request without developing arguments both for and against it. India also sought a number of American clarifications on the status and authority of the Indian troops. One report indicated that, as a way to entice India to accept the request, Washington had suggested Indian troop deployments in northern Iraq where the Kurds are located. This area, so far, has remained the least violent, as the Kurds have not joined hands with the Iraqis battling the American and British troops. U.S. Ambassador to India Robert Blackwill had said earlier that Indian troops in Iraq would operate under their own flag and would be used for non-combat operations. India said, finally, that the explanations it received were inadequate.

India's Domestic and Foreign Policy Factors

At home, the Vajpayee government's decision was accepted warmly. In a July 15 editorial, *The Hindu*, a Chennai-based English news daily, described the decision as "the triumph of democratic national opinion and political good sense over vacillating tendencies and grandiose visions of *realpolitik*, which showed scant regard for the nation's independence of foreign policy, a parliamentary resolution, the views of Opposition parties, the dignity and interests of the Indian armed forces, and the overwhelming national mood." A few days earlier, a national newsweekly, *Outlook India*, published a survey showing that 69% of Indians opposed sending troops under the U.S.-U.K. occupation forces. What seems to bother the Indians most, as a senior Indian official told the media: "The bottom line is, no matter how you read Resolution 1483, our troops will have to serve under someone else—Gen. John Abizaid (the new commander of the U.S. Central Command)."

Not to be underestimated either are the domestic political factors. With the general elections due in another year, the BJP-led coalition government knew better than to make the troop deployment a sticky factor in the coming electoral campaign against its main opposition, the Congress party. And the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—the orthodox religious think-tank that once controlled the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—came out recently with a strong statement warning the government of the negative social and political consequences if the troops were sent.

The other likely factor in helping New Delhi to make the decision was the Prime Minister's June 22-27 visit to China. It is widely acknowledged that China has no interest in helping the Americans in Iraq, and it is almost a certainty that the subject was under discussion when the Prime Minister was in Beijing. The friendly exchanges between Vajpayee and the Chinese leaders were another signal that New Delhi would not go through with the American request.