Robert Hathaway

"Recent Communal Violence in Gujarat, India, and the U.S. Response": Robert M. Hathaway Testimony

JUNE 10, 2002

Mme Chair and members of the Commission:

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you this morning. I spent more than six years of my career working from an office in this very building, and another six years working in an adjacent building, so this represents something of a homecoming for me.

Unfortunately, my appearance before you today is the direct result of a great human tragedy that has unfolded in India over the past several months, a fact that severely diminishes what pleasure I might otherwise feel by being here today.

I also wish to specify that I testify here today not as a representative of the Woodrow Wilson Center, but in my private capacity as a longtime observer of India and of U.S.-India relations.

I have been asked to place the communal violence in Gujarat into a broader context, with a special focus on what this tragedy might mean, or not mean, for U.S. relations with India.

But before attempting that task, I wish to add my voice to those who have already expressed shock and horror and profound sadness at the events that have caused us to gather here today.

We have heard tales of immense human suffering and unimaginable depravity. We have been told of acts of deliberate and preconceived savagery. Our hearts reach out to the victims of this shameful carnage.

Of equal concern are credible reports from multiple sources that local officials in Gujarat failed to act to protect victims of communal violence -- indeed, that the authorities deliberately encouraged such violence by looking the other way.

We have also received information suggesting that national politicians were unconscionably slow in responding to the early reports of violence, and that some persons in positions of authority, rather than moving to dampen communal tensions, have callously and irresponsibly stirred the pot of religious intolerance for selfish political or personal purposes.

All these are reports that elicit profound sorrow. Those behind these shameful acts - as well as those who by their inaction facilitated this tragedy - merit the world's condemnation.

One would hope that government authorities in India would now move decisively to prevent further bloodshed and destruction, and to address the physical and spiritual needs of the thousands who have been displaced by the violence in Gujarat. This would seem the bare minimum we should expect of India in the days ahead.

A restrained official U.S. response

The public response from the Bush administration to the events in Gujarat has been remarkably low-key - in comparison both to the magnitude of the tragedy, and to the public response from Europe and Japan.

I have no doubt that American officials take second place to no one in their horror at what has transpired in Gujarat, and in their uneasiness at reports that complicity, negligence, or apathy on the part of some Indian officials have compounded the tragedy.

Nonetheless, it is notable that as a government, we have been remarkably restrained in our public expressions of concern.

The reason for this relatively low-key American response rests in part, I expect, in a recognition that in dealing with India and Indians, private representations rather than public harangues frequently prove more effective in producing a desired result.

The explanations for this are many and complicated. Suffice it to say that for the better part of the past half century - indeed, extending back even before India's birth as an independent state in 1947 - the relationship between the United States and India has been a troubled and prickly one.

Each of these countries has been wont to lecture the other, to assume an air of moral superiority that, rather than convince the other, has only produced resentment and a stubborn disinclination to admit the validity of the concerns being articulated.

Today, I am pleased to report, there exists a somewhat more mature relationship between our two countries.

But these old patterns of suspicion and resentment remain not far below the surface, and I expect the Bush administration was correct in its assessment that a muted voice rather than megaphone diplomacy was best calculated to convince Indians that U.S. concerns were genuine. I do not criticize the Bush administration on this count.

The need for public expressions of concern

At the same time, there is also a place for more public expressions of concern, even horror, so I applaud the Commission for convening today's hearing.

The United States must take care not to convey the impression that a moderate response to the horror that has unfolded in Gujarat indicates a failure of compassion, a willful decision to turn a blind eye to the tragedy.

To the contrary, private behind-the-scenes representations from U.S. officials are apt to carry more weight if they are backed up by highly public expressions of anger and disgust from other Americans.

Whether one thinks in terms of America as a moral force in the world, or of more modest U.S. political and diplomatic objectives, we must take care that no one doubts our revulsion over what has happened in Gujarat, or the intensity of our convictions.

In this regard, I would think it essential that those in the United States -- including those in the U.S. Congress -- who are seen as India's friends not hesitate to speak out on these matters.

Especially India's friends should leave no doubt as to our abhorrence of what has happened.

Not so much in anger as in sorrow - but also with the frankness and candor befitting friends.

I must say that I have been somewhat dismayed in this regard that more of India's friends in the U.S. Congress have not addressed these issues publicly.

I wonder why, for instance, there have not been congressional resolutions on Gujarat, or why more members of Congress have not spoken out - and here, I am not talking about Members who are well known as India-bashers, but those known for their sympathies for India and their belief in the importance of strengthening the U.S. - India relationship.

Again, not so much to criticize or condemn, but to make it clear that the United States and the United States Congress care about all Indians, not merely the Hindu majority.

America and the Muslim world

At this particular moment in history, it is especially important that the United States not allow the impression to take hold that Americans somehow value a Muslim life less than the life of a person of another religion.

In this sense, there exists a direct linkage between the Gujarat massacres and the global war against terrorism.

As the members of this Commission know, there are some in the Islamic world who assert that the present conflict is a war directed not against terrorism, but against Islam. That the United States does not care about Muslims. That we seek to utilize the tragedies of September 11 to carry out long-desired plans to repress the Islamic world.

These are detestable lies. But many in the Muslim world are prepared to believe them.

As a consequence, it is incumbent upon us to fight these false impressions, to avoid any steps that might buttress such gross distortions of America's views and values and purposes.

Here then is yet another reason why India's friends in the United States should speak out, to condemn intolerance and hatred, to lend support to those Indians, of all religious beliefs, who are working to address the wrongs that have been committed, and to encourage the moderates and those who believe in a just, secular, multicultural India.

I would also urge the American ambassador in New Delhi to demonstrate his nation's true sentiments by means of a high-visibility action that would underscore America's sympathy for the victims of the Gujarat pogrom.

This might take the form of a visit to one of the Muslim refugee camps that have sprung up to house the thousands who have fled their homes.

Or an inspection tour of one of the Muslim neighborhoods destroyed in the violence.

Ambassador Blackwill should demonstrate our concern for the Hindu victims of intolerance as well.

But since the vast majority of the Gujarat victims have been Muslim, it is especially important that America's senior diplomat in India be seen as demonstrating a particular concern about the fate and future of this community.

An internal Indian affair?

There are those in India, of course, who say that the tragic events in Gujarat are a domestic Indian affair, and that the United States and

the rest of the world have no business intruding into a purely internal Indian matter.

This is an erroneous and self-serving falsehood.

We have already seen that the war against terrorism can be directly impacted by what we say - and fail to say - about Gujarat.

In addition, the violence in Gujarat, and the steps the Indian government might take in coming months in response to these events, will have a significant impact on American views of India, and hence, on political and public support in this country for a close and collaborative U.S. - India partnership.

So rather than being merely a domestic Indian matter, Gujarat impacts directly and in multiple ways on important American interests and objectives.

But beyond this, India is a signatory to various international human rights covenants, including the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.

These are international accords into which India has voluntarily entered - and in so doing, acknowledging that matters falling under the compass of these accords are properly subjects of concern of the international community.

We should be under no compulsion to accept the view that recent events in Gujarat are a strictly domestic Indian affair, and therefore off limits to international scrutiny, any more than we accept similar arguments from China, Serbia, or Sudan.

A sectarian versus a secular India

The United States also has a keen interest in seeing India strengthen and further institutionalize the forces of secularism,

toleration, and moderation within that country.

Here again, it is incorrect to say that we have no interest in the events of Gujarat.

To the contrary, all who admire Indian culture and Indian accomplishments, who celebrate the extraordinary progress India has achieved in its still brief national existence, understand that the tragedy of Gujarat strikes at the very essence of India's being, India's promise.

In this respect, I would draw the attention of the members of this Commission to the recent assassination in Kashmir of Abdul Ghani Lone, a Kashmiri nationalist who opposed India's iron-fisted rule in Kashmir, but who in his final years had come to the realization that violence and extremism offer Kashmiris no way out in their struggle with New Delhi.

Lone's death last month represented another blow to the ideals of tolerance and moderation, another triumph for the forces of hatred and sectarian-based violence.

In this sense, the tragedies of Gujarat and of Kashmir are inextricably linked.
Kashmir was certainly not the cause of Gujarat. Sadly, the seeds of Godhra and Ahmedabad and Baroda spring from still more ancient soils.

But the continued violence in Kashmir makes the hatred we have recently seen in Gujarat more likely, and in a perverted sense, more "respectable," or at least acceptable.

Perhaps it does not go too far to assert that until the Kashmir sore is at last healed, the poison that produced Gujarat will make other Gujarats increasingly likely.

Impact on U.S. - India relations

Some have asked what impact the recent events in Gujarat will have - should have - on the new and healthier relationship that the United

States is developing with India.

Commission members will not need to be reminded of the tortured history of U.S. - India relations over the years, or the difficulty the two nations have had in working collaboratively with one another, even on those issues where our purposes and interests ran along parallel tracks.

Over the past half dozen or so years - and notwithstanding the temporary if traumatic jolt to the relationship administered by India's 1998 nuclear weapons tests and the subsequent imposition of American sanctions - Washington and New Delhi have begun to construct a qualitatively better relationship - so much so that Prime Minister Vajpayee has come to describe the two countries as "natural allies" - a phrase increasingly used by Americans as well.

Following the trauma Americans experienced on September 11, India was one of the first countries in the world to step forward with a pledge of unconditional and unambivalent support for the United States in its quest to bring to justice those responsible for the terror attacks in New York and Washington.

Prior to the February 27 Godhra attack that touched off the bloodshed in Gujarat, this new and more sanguine relationship between the United States and India was widely viewed as in the American national interest.

It remains so today, despite the killings in Gujarat.

This is not an issue that divides Republicans from Democrats, conservatives from liberals.

There now exists in this country a widespread consensus that India is too important a country, and possesses too much potential, for the United States to treat it with the disdain or indifference that, in the past, was frequently our custom.

Gujarat has not changed this calculation.

And yet, it is neither possible nor practical for us simply to move forward and pretend that Gujarat did not happen.

I recently had the opportunity to spend some time with a senior member of the Indian government, who is also a leading member of the BJP. I must tell you that although I was hardly naive about the BJP and its more intransigent wing, I left this meeting shaken by what I had heard during his remarks on the communal violence in Gujarat.

Until prodded to do so, after spending 10 or 15 minutes on the subject, this senior Indian official expressed no remorse over the violence, nor any recognition that a great human tragedy had taken place.

At no time did he acknowledge that the overwhelming majority of the Gujarat victims had come from the minority, and presumably more vulnerable, community.

Nor did he acknowledge that credible reports and respected sources have raised serious issues regarding possible negligence or even complicity in these events by BJP officials at the Center and especially the state level.

He made no attempt to deal with the suggestion that the BJP and its affiliated organizations bear some responsibility for these events by encouraging intolerance and religious bigotry.

Instead, he tried to shift responsibility for the tragedy to others - especially the media but also cross-border "jihadis" and even the minority community itself - while dismissing any thought that those in positions of power might also be called accountable.

Lastly, I was appalled when this official described questions regarding a possible role of the BJP government in these events as "blasphemous."

In short, he could not have been more effective in raising doubts about the similarity of American and Indian values - a frequent argument offered by those lauding the "democratic values" linking the two countries - had he deliberately set out to do so.

Do not get me wrong here: I applaud the new, more mature relationship we have established with India in recent years. I believe in the desirability, nay, the importance, of a close and collaborative Indo-American partnership. I agree with those who underscore the complementarity of both interests and values that increasingly bind the United States and India.

Nonetheless, I do not think we can simply write off as immaterial or irrelevant the views expressed by my interlocutor.

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First, because he is a senior official in the government.

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Second, because his opinions apparently reflect a considerable body of sentiment in both official and nonofficial circles in India.

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And third, because while at the moment Prime Minister Vajpayee presents a more reassuring face for the current government, we have to recognize that Vajpayee's tenure in office is subject to the vagaries of domestic politics, ill health, and advancing years. The less benign face of the BJP represented by the official with whom I spoke could well be the predominant strand of the BJP, and of the Indian government, in the years ahead.

We ought to take note of that possibility, and to regard it as an issue of concern and a factor that would almost surely greatly complicate the U.S. - India relationship.

American humility

Finally, I would suggest that as we contemplate the spectacle of wholesale, horrendous, barbaric butchery in Gujarat, we not lose sight of our own national shortcomings.

I feel certain that members of this Commission will agree with me when I note that America has much about which it can take great pride, but that we are far from resolving all the ills that infect our own society.

It is entirely appropriate that we expect the people and the government of India to face up to the tragedy of Gujarat, and to take all necessary measures both to help the victims of the violence begin to refashion their lives, and to do everything humanly possible to prevent a reoccurrence of such a national tragedy.

India should do these things, and take these steps, not because the United States asks or expects her to do so, but because she owes this to herself.

But as we make known our views on these issues, it is also appropriate that we do so with humility and a keen awareness of our own imperfections.

Recommendations

I conclude this testimony with a number of specific recommendations for action.

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This Commission should call upon the government of India to take decisive steps to stop the killings and other communal violence that continue to this day. As tragic as the violence up to now has been, even more tragic is the fact that murder and bloodshed continue. The United States and this Commission should make clear their belief that Indian authorities must act immediately to bring further violence to an end.

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The United States and concerned Americans should work with the central and state governments of India, with international agencies, and with Indian, American, and other non-governmental organizations to

provide relief for the victims of the bloodletting in Gujarat, and to help them begin the process of rebuilding their lives. This is a matter of some urgency. Conditions in many of the refugee camps housing those who have fled the violence are grim. Worse is to come, as the monsoon season is approaching, and with the rains, the inevitable epidemics. The Indian government has been strangely slow in dealing with the issues of resettlement and compensation for the victims of the violence. We should let New Delhi know that this is an issue of considerable importance to the United States, and that we will be monitoring progress in these areas closely.

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Senior U.S. officials in India, including the American ambassador, should undertake high-visibility actions to demonstrate America's sympathy for the victims of the Gujarat carnage. Appropriate actions might include a visit to a Muslim refugee camp, or to one of the Muslim neighborhoods destroyed in the violence.

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The United States and this Commission should encourage the government of India to use the full resources of the United Nations Development Programme and other U.N. relief agencies to provide humanitarian assistance for those now living in refugee camps. For India to request and facilitate outside assistance would not constitute an admission of weakness or culpability. To the contrary, such action would underscore the government's commitment to assisting the victims and its abhorrence of sectarian violence.

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The United States should encourage the government of India to bring to justice those, of all religious persuasions, who bear a responsibility for this tragedy. Sadly, India has a long history of failing to punish those who have fomented sectarian or communal violence. Until the Indian judicial system redresses this failure, Indians can expect to see reoccurrences of the Gujarat pogrom.

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The United States and private groups should work to strengthen those individuals and organizations within India that are trying to promote tolerance and communal harmony. The Indian National Human Rights Commission has made many very constructive recommendations along these lines. We should indicate our support for these recommendations, and our expectation that the Indian government will make a good faith effort to implement them.

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Those Americans who are publicly identified as friends of India, including and perhaps especially members of the U.S. Congress, should take the lead in condemning the violence in Gujarat, and in urging the government of India to take all necessary steps to punish those responsible for these crimes, to assist the victims, and to ensure that a repetition of this tragedy not occur.

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The two houses of Congress might adopt resolutions expressing concern and dismay over recent events in Gujarat. Such resolutions might simultaneously voice support for the bilateral U.S. - India relationship, note that communal violence undercuts public and political support within the United States for close Indo-American relations, and applaud the government of India for any constructive steps it might have taken to assist the victims of the violence, to bring to justice those responsible for this tragedy, and to promote communal harmony.

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Credible reports suggest that substantial sums of money are sent from Indians resident in the United States, and from American citizens of Indian origin, to groups and organizations in Gujarat and elsewhere in India that are directly linked to the violence in Gujarat. If these reports prove to be accurate, then it is possible that such financial transactions violate U.S. anti-terrorism or other statutes. The Commission should urge an official inquiry into financial transactions of this nature, to ensure that U.S. laws are not being violated.

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The Commission should also recommend an inquiry into fund-raising activities in the United States by groups implicated in the Gujarat violence. Responsible sources report that some U.S. residents make financial contributions to overseas religious groups in the belief that these funds are to be used for religious or humanitarian purposes, when in fact the monies so raised are used to promote religious bigotry. [See Wall Street Journal, May 22, 2002, p. A26, for one such report.] The United States has acted in the past to regulate or even to ban fund-raising activities by groups advocating violence and ethnic or religious intolerance in other countries, as well as activities where fraud may be an issue. It is possible that such issues come into play here as well.

I thank the members of the Commission for their invitation to testify this morning. I stand ready to take any questions they may care to pose now, and to work with them and members of the Commission staff on these issues in the days ahead.

Robert M. Hathaway is director of the Asia Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C. He appears before the Commission today not as a representative of the Wilson Center, but in his private capacity as a longtime observer of India and of U.S.-India relations.