



An Indian soldier on a street in Srinagar; curfews have trapped many Kashmiris in their homes.



The 'Most Dangerous Place in the World'?

A recent crackdown in Kashmir has raised tensions between India and Pakistan and increased the possibility of violent conflict **BY PATRICIA SMITH**

Kashmir is a Muslim-majority territory that sits high in the Himalayan mountains on the dividing line between India and Pakistan. For 72 years—ever since those two nations became independent—it has been a source of conflict between them.

India and Pakistan both claim Kashmir, with a population of about 12.5 million people, and both control parts of it. The two nuclear-armed nations have even fought two wars over the dispute. Former president Bill Clinton once called Kashmir “the most dangerous place in the world.” Still, for decades an uneasy stalemate has prevailed, broken by occasional military incursions, terrorist attacks, and police clampdowns.

But that fragile situation shattered in August, when India sent troops into the portion of Kashmir that it controls. As part of the crackdown, the Indian government shut down internet and phone service, leaving millions of Kashmiris

almost completely cut off from the outside world.

In Srinagar, the region’s largest city, soldiers hunkered down behind checkpoints. People glanced furtively out their windows, afraid to step outside their homes. Protests erupted and repeatedly descended into violence. The crackdown has raised tensions between India and Pakistan and shocked the international community.

“You have two nuclear powers who’ve fought four wars, and two of them have been over Kashmir,” says Anubhav Gupta, an India expert at the Asia Society in New York. “People are concerned that if there’s any sort of military confrontation again, that’s very dangerous.”

British Partition

Unrest in Kashmir dates back to the chaos that accompanied the 1947 partition of British India. At that time, the British agreed

Mass arrests, an internet blackout, and a military occupation

ATUL LOKE/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX (SOLDIER); DAR YASIN/AP PHOTO (PROTEST)

JIM McMAHON (MAP)



Kashmiris run from a tear gas explosion during a protest in Srinagar in August.



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to divide their former colony into two countries: Pakistan, with a Muslim majority, and India, with a Hindu majority. Kashmir, which was ruled by a Hindu prince but had a majority-Muslim population, chose to remain independent. But shortly after independence, Pakistani militants invaded Kashmir, which prompted the Kashmiri prince to seek help from India. That led to a federation with India, which designated Kashmir an autonomous territory.

India controls about two-thirds of Kashmir and Pakistan the other third. But Pakistan has a long history of covertly backing militant groups inside the Indian-administered areas of Kashmir, and that support has helped keep alive a small militant movement that opposes Indian rule.

India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, is a Hindu nationalist who campaigned on promises to integrate Kashmir into the rest of India. The military incursion came as Modi announced he was removing Kashmir's limited autonomy. That plays well with Modi's supporters, who have long been suspicious of the Muslim-majority region.

But Pakistani leaders expressed outrage and responded by ending trade with India and kicking India's ambassador to Pakistan out of the country.

The crackdown has made life very hard for Kashmiris. Schools have been closed. In many areas, residents have needed to produce a curfew pass to leave their homes, even for medical emergencies.

"It's a living hell here," says Jamila, a doctor at Lala Ded hospital in Srinagar who, like a small number of South Asians, goes by one name.

JIM MCMAHON (MAP)

Kashmir at a Glance

WHAT IS KASHMIR?
It's a territory in the Himalayas with 12.5 million people that both India and Pakistan claim.

WHY ARE THEY FIGHTING ABOUT IT?
Pakistan, a Muslim country, says that because Kashmir has a Muslim majority, it rightfully belongs with Pakistan. India points to a 1947 agreement with Kashmir's prince that made the territory essentially part of India.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?
India and Pakistan are nuclear-armed nations with a long history of conflict. They've already fought two wars over Kashmir—one in 1947 and another in 1965.

Local officials say that at least 2,000 Kashmiris—including business leaders, human rights defenders, elected representatives, teachers, and students as young as 14—have been rounded up by Indian security forces and arrested. Indian soldiers have been accused of using excessive force against Kashmiri civilians, and the mass arrests have drawn criticism from human rights groups and the United Nations.

Untapped Potential

No one disputes that Kashmir needs change. Tens of thousands of people have been killed in the conflict, and the economy is in ruins. The area has enormous economic potential: stunning alpine scenery, great downhill skiing, endless apple orchards, and a centuries-old excellence in weaving carpets. But economic development has lagged. Modi says the new status will make Kashmir more peaceful and prosperous.

The tug-of-war over Kashmir is often explained as a conflict between Hindus and Muslims. But Gupta says it's more complicated than that: Because Kashmir also borders China, it has a strategic and geopolitical importance to India.

"Kashmir serves as a buffer state to these two rivals, Pakistan and China," he says. "India knows that this territory is very critical for India's larger security." •

With reporting by Sameer Yasir, Suhasini Raj, and Jeffrey Gettleman of The New York Times.

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