

Kashmir: Living in the crossfire

As Indo-Pakistani relations deteriorate, Kashmir has once more been thrust into the spotlight as the frontline between the sub-continent's two nuclear powers. **Henry James Foy** visits the region.

Surrounded by barbed wire and filled with soldiers brandishing submachine guns, Srinagar Airport, with international ambitions and dreams of becoming India's northern hub, is more Guantanamo than Gatwick.

Outside the airport's sentry towers and heavy gates, the overwhelming military presence continues. Soldiers, idly fiddling with rifles or chatting in small groups, outnumber civilians who huddle in groups by the side of the road. Shutters on shops are closed and traffic is minimal.

On a bridge leading out of the city, two Indian soldiers man a checkpoint of barbed wire and a fortified machine-gun turret. They speak Hindi, not Kashmiri, and fire questions at our driver.

"The soldiers can stop you going for no reason. They have complete power," our guide remarks, shrugging, as we are waved through after a few minutes of questioning.

As we drive through town after town – typically the only car on the road – it becomes very apparent that the Indian Army is not left over from previous wars in the region, nor are they on an extended peace-keeping mission; this is an internal occupation.

Srinagar, only 50km from the 'Line of Control', an unofficial ceasefire line created in 1971 between India and Pakistan, and only 160km away from Islamabad, lies on the front line in what has, since the terrorist attacks on Mumbai and the blame placed on the Pakistani government, shifted from diplomatic debate into a high-tension standoff.

Even in Pahalgam, a small

"[Border] force protection measures can be transformed into an offensive in the shortest possible time"

Indian Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor

town deep in the foothills of the Himalayas, the Indian army is present. An outbreak of separatism here would be tough to imagine, yet all along the one road that runs through the collection of fabric stores and small hotels small groups of armed soldiers gather.

"The soldiers are now a part of the town, of life. There is nothing for them to do. They watch, and wait. I do not know for what," a shopkeeper in Pahalgam tells me. "I think maybe they are here just to



Over 60,000 Indian troops are stationed in Kashmir

watch us, to see," he shrugs.

The military presence in Kashmir is substantial. The Indian Border Security Force totals around 180,000 troops, with over a third stationed in here alone thanks to a string of wars with Pakistan and an armed government drive to quash separatist movements.

Jammu & Kashmir is India's only Muslim-dominated state, while the Kashmiri Valley, in the North, has a Muslim population of over 97%. In the late 1980s, a struggle for religious freedom culminated in the formation of insurgency campaigns calling for Pakistani rule. India claimed these were funded by the Pakistani government, and as a result invoked policy in 1990 allowing troops to use special powers in the state.

And the situation could soon get much worse. Since the events of November, the governments of New Delhi and Islamabad have escalated tensions and put both sides of the border on high alert.

India's "endeavours for peace and restoration of friendly ties should not be construed as a weakness. India...will give a fitting reply to terrorists," said Sonia Gandhi, Indian Congress President in late December. Indian Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor told the *Times of*

India that troops in Kashmir were on high alert with full-scale "force protection measures that can be transformed into an offensive in the shortest possible time."

This month, Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani said that the situation on the border has "once again turned fragile," while Army Chief Parvez Kayani said his forces were "prepared to meet any eventuality. Pakistan will respond within minutes of any surgical strikes by India." Pakistan has moved an estimated 20,000 troops to the Indian border this month, and cancelled leave for all its soldiers.

Indian Air Force jets have reportedly been chased out of Pakistani airspace, while alleged Pakistani militants were

arrested in Kashmir for an attempted plot to use terrorism to disrupt the recent state elections. Other reports suggest that the Taliban have offered their assistance to the Pakistani government should any attacks on India occur.

"We are at the cusp of war," said former Pakistani ambassador Zafar Hilaly. "I really do think there is a chance. We shouldn't, by any means, rule out some kind of hostile action on the part of India," he told *The Guardian* in late December. The Foreign Ministers of both countries have declared that the four-year-long peace process in the region has broken down since November.

Recently elected Chief Minister of Jammu & Kashmir, Omar Abdullah, has stressed

that revenge for the Mumbai bombings will achieve nothing. "Pakistan is not an enemy but some forces within that country were inimical to good relations with India. It is those forces who have to be defeated and not Pakistan," he said.

Since 1947, wars between India and Pakistan have killed over 60,000 civilians, 22,000 troops and wounded countless more. With a bitter history and national pride and prestige at stake, they risk tumbling back into armed conflict.

While politicians and generals mull over plans of action and rattle cross-border sabres with stinging rhetoric, ordinary Kashmiris, straddling national and religious identity, must wait to see if they risk getting caught in the crossfire once more.

BORDER TENSIONS

February 1999

Pakistani soldiers and militants cross the Line of Control and take strategic locations within Indian territory. India mobilises 200,000 troops and attacks, beginning the Kargil War. Pakistani plans to launch a nuclear attack but are talked down by US President Bill Clinton before India drives the Pakistani forces back across the border. Over 2,000 troops are killed in 4 months of fighting; Pervez Musharraf launches his *coup d'état* after the war.

December 2001

India claims a bomb attack on its Parliament building was Pakistani-linked, and moves 500,000 troops to Line of Control. Pakistan responds with 120,000 troops.

Resulting skirmishes kill 50 civilians and 800 combatants. Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf warns India "not to expect a conventional war from Pakistan", while Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes says India could "take a bomb or two or more, but when we respond there will be no Pakistan."

December 2008

India claims a three-day terrorist siege in Mumbai was Pakistani-linked, and demands the extradition of suspected terror leaders. Pakistan refuses, and moves 20,000 troops to the border following accusations of 'war-mongering' by both sides. Army chiefs from both countries declare they are ready for armed hostilities.

