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## **Beautiful Kashmir Valley has become world's most dangerous nuclear hotspot**

**By Beth Duff-Brown**

SRINAGAR, India (AP) – Sitting on the lawn of a restored maharajah's palace amid the reddening leaves of massive maples, sipping saffron tea laced with cinnamon, one gets lost in the meditative meandering of gondolas on the lake.

The shops of Srinagar are filled with the sweet smell of almond cookies and ripe red apples. Thousands of copper pots hang in the windows, and cheerful gap-toothed men hawk the soft pashmina shawls now *de rigueur* among Western women.

Then the sun starts to set behind the lush Zabarwan hills, and the welcoming smiles begin to fade. Kashmiris quickly head home, looking over shoulders and bolting doors.

Darkness falls and one sees why these Himalayan foothills are considered the most dangerous place in the world: Shadowy bombers and gunmen haunt the Kashmir Valley, laying the fuse that could light the world's first nuclear war.

The families in the houseboats that line the shores of Dal Lake secure their shutters. Indian soldiers hunker down behind their sandbags, dark eyes and AK-47s peering through barbed-wire windows, scanning the streets in anticipation of the next bomb or grenade.

Mothers of teen-age boys stand on street corners, wringing their hands, scouring the dusk for the silhouettes of their sons, praying they have not joined the thousands of young men thought to be dead, arrested or gone to join the armies of Islam.

The sign in front of the Srinagar tourism office that said, "Welcome to Happy Valley" is gone.

"Everything has gone. Peace has gone, honor has gone, human values have gone," says Syed Ali Shah Geelani, a leading Kashmiri politician who hands a foreign visitor a chronology of the attempts on his life when she enters his house, which has been fortified against shelling.

"There is nothing left here except fear," Geelani laments.

President Clinton said as much during his visit in March, when he described one of the most beautiful and bountiful jewels in the Indian crown as "the most dangerous place in the world right now."

Kashmir today is also a place where old certainties are no longer clear. The attraction of joining Pakistan is no longer universally shared as the South Asian neighbor sinks deeper into political and economic disarray under a military regime and strict Islamic law.

Muslim militants have turned down India's latest cease-fire offer, but the leading coalition of separatist parties in Srinagar has welcomed New Delhi's gesture. Other influential voices that once espoused Pakistan's cause are reconsidering.

India and Pakistan have gone to war twice over the Himalayan region since 1947, when Britain gave up the subcontinent and divided Kashmir between the two countries.

Over the years, Kashmir became part of a vast arc of Islamic ferment stretching from the Middle East through Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and onward as far as western China.

Things turned even more ominous in 1998, when India and Pakistan conducted rival nuclear tests.

The Utah-sized territory formally known as Jammu-Kashmir is home to 4 million Muslims and 2 million Hindus. India rules two-thirds and Pakistan the remainder. Muslims are the majority in both parts.

India claims that losing Kashmir would provoke other Indian Muslims, about 140 million of the country's 1 billion people, and other minorities to thoughts of rebellion. Kashmir also is rich in minerals and agriculture and is strategically positioned on the borders of Pakistan, Russia, China and Afghanistan.

Pakistan feels it was robbed in 1947, that it would have been given the majority-Muslim territory had the state maharajah at the time not been a Hindu.

Tens of thousands of civilians have been killed in the 11 years since Kashmiri Muslims took up arms, demanding that India give them independence or let them become part of Pakistan.

Cease-fire offers come and go. The Hezb-ul Mujahedeen, one of the largest groups fighting for independence, put one forward in July. Kashmiris rejoiced, but not for long. India refused to include Pakistan in peace talks, the truce quickly fell apart and the violence resumed.

On Nov. 19, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee announced a unilateral cease-fire for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. This time it was rejected by the Pakistan-based United Jihad Council, which represents 14 groups fighting in Kashmir.

In Srinagar, however, a Muslim leader told The Associated Press that Vajpayee's offer was a "positive change."

"We would like to engage with the Indians, the Pakistanis and the leaders of the boys who have taken to guns," said Abdul Gani Bhat, chairman of the All Party Hurriyat Conference, a coalition of Kashmiri separatist parties.

The Indian government hopes Vajpayee's announcement leads to new discussions with the rebels, and possibly separately with Pakistan, a government official told the AP on condition of anonymity.

An Indian army suspension of attacks on the guerrillas during Ramadan in 1997 dramatically reduced violence, but fighting flared up again when the fasting month ended.

Last summer, pro-Pakistan militants captured strategic Himalayan peaks in Kashmir. India responded with strong military action. The 11-week conflict claimed 1,000 lives.

Clinton called on Nawaz Sharif, then Pakistan's prime minister, to restore the 1972 cease-fire line that divides Kashmir.

But for Clinton's intervention, "a nuclear war was imminent," says Ali Imran, a political analyst in Srinagar.

The Kashmiri uprising began with 1987 provincial elections that Muslim youths claimed were rigged in favor of the ruling party. By 1989, many of those young men, backed by Islamic guerrillas from Pakistan, had taken to arms.

The insurgency gained support from Muslim Kashmiris who resented centuries of domination by Mughals, Sikhs and Hindus. As Indian forces poured in, Kashmiris renewed demands that India recognize a 1948 U.N. resolution granting their right to a vote on whether to remain in India, join Pakistan or become independent.

India now has some 600,000 soldiers in the valley \_ one for every seven Kashmiris.

The Indian government says 30,000 civilians and militants have been killed since 1989, as well as 2,000 police and security officials. Human rights groups and opposition leaders put the number between 60,000 and 80,000. They say 2,500 Muslim men and boys are missing, snatched either by Indian security forces or militants.

"You never know what will happen in Kashmir," says Nazir Bakshi, a travel agent who implores foreigners to come to his beautiful birthplace, yet concedes it's not safe. "I have a fear of going back home every night. I may be shot dead, or I may never hear another gun again. We are a sick people. Every morning, when a Kashmiri gets up, his blood pressure shoots up."

Kashmiris say every family has at least one story of an atrocity committed by soldiers, police or militants.

Gulam Hassan, a 40-year-old father of four, makes 3,000 rupees (\$65) a month selling milk and cheese. He was at his roadside stand one recent afternoon when three "special operations officers" \_ former militants now working for the government \_ began to beat a local boy.

"When I asked them why they were hitting him, they told me to mind my own business," said Hassan. "I guess I embarrassed them. They told me they would teach me a lesson."

They came back a few hours later, accused him of owning a gun and threw him in jail for six days. He said they beat him and forced him to drink water until he vomited. His family paid 20,000 rupees (\$435) to get him out of jail.

"They usually take people and kill them, or break their bones," said Hassan. "I was lucky."

At the height of the insurgency, Muslims in Indian Kashmir defiantly signaled allegiance to Pakistan by raising its flag on its independence day.

Farooq Abdullah's father was jailed for 21 years for leading the call for Kashmir independence. Today, as chief minister of Jammu-Kashmir, the state's highest elected official, he vehemently opposes splitting from India.

"They may want independence, they may want paradise, but it is just not possible," Farooq said in an interview. "Let us be sure of what we can have. Independence is a glorious idea, but I don't want to have that blood on my hands."

Instead, he wants autonomy under the Indian constitution, leaving the national government in New Delhi in charge of defense, foreign policy, currency and communications.

Another Muslim voice skeptical of unity with Pakistan is a professor at Kashmir University who wanted to be identified only as Abdul.

"India has democracy. It may be flawed, but it's still a democracy, unlike Pakistan, where it has been one military ruler after another for decades," he said. "In India, the infrastructure is better. Better roads, hospitals, schools. But if I say this publicly in Kashmir, I'll be killed."

Kashmir's inspector general of police, Ashok Bhan, said security has improved since last summer's clashes with Pakistan.

"It's not so horrifying, is it?" he asked. "People are going off to work and going about their business."

Bhan estimated that by the end of the year, an additional 1,700 Muslim militants will have been killed in the valley.

Bhan, a Hindu Kashmiri, denied the reports of human rights groups that thousands of people have disappeared at the hands of Indian security forces. He said some 5,000 Kashmiri youth have crossed into Pakistan to train in "terrorist camps" or were killed at the border.

Clinton said this year that if asked, he would mediate in talks between Pakistan and India. He backed off when India insisted Kashmir was its own problem that would be solved only if the Pakistani government in Islamabad stopped supporting the guerrillas.

Pakistan insists it only gives moral support, but no money, arms or training to Kashmiri militants who shelter within its borders.

Many Kashmiri separatists believe the United States has an obligation to intervene, that Washington can force India to the negotiating table by toughening the economic sanctions already in place on both sides over the nuclear tests. Others charge the West is more enamored with the enormous trade and investment potential in India than with Kashmir's cause.

Politician Geelani, 71, who supports merger with Pakistan and spent nine years in jail for his role in the Islamic movement, speaks for the many Kashmiris who believe the world has turned its back on them.

"Where is the global sympathy?" he asks. "I will tell you with a broken heart that the world community does not care. We are not human beings in their eyes. We are but human birds in the Indian cage."