

Kashmir's uncertain future

India's most troubled region remains in crisis

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WHAT'S NEXT for Kashmir? Since India blamed Pakistan for backing a terrorist attack in Pahalgam on April 22nd, thousands of Kashmiris have been displaced from their homes. Pakistani shelling has killed nearly two dozen people in Indian-administered Kashmir. Two days after a ceasefire Narendra Modi, India's prime minister, announced a "new normal": terrorist attacks will be treated as acts of war. Many Kashmiris fear that this new normal will entrench old problems.

Indian governments have wrestled with Kashmir for decades. A war with Pakistan over the former princely state in 1947 left it divided and its borders contested. Under Article 370 of India's constitution,

the Indian-administered Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), the country's only Muslim-majority state, was granted notional autonomy except on foreign policy, defence and communications. Since 1989 a homegrown insurgency against Indian rule, and repeated attacks by Pakistan-based militants, mean that J&K has been governed by anti-terror laws designed for exceptional circumstances.



In 2019 Mr Modi fulfilled a long-held Hindu-nationalist promise and scrapped Article 370. J&K was stripped of its statehood and brought under federal rule. In exchange, Mr Modi promised “normalcy”: the restoration of peace and prosperity in the absence of self-rule. The government placed Kashmiri politicians under house arrest, detained thousands of civilians and forced a months-long internet and phone blackout. Half a million security personnel watch over the 1.4m locals of J&K.

Three outcomes now seem likely. For a start, Kashmir may face more repression. Since April 22nd, security forces have pursued what Mohamad Yousuf Tarigami, a member of the J&K legislative assembly, called “collective punishment”, including bulldozing the homes belonging to families of suspected militants. Within two weeks of the attack police said they had questioned or detained 2,800 Kashmiris.

This includes one journalist: Hilal Mir, a reporter working with Indian and international media, was detained for “anti-national” social-media posts. A police officer in Srinagar, the largest city, is prepping for more crackdowns: “Modi has taken this to another level and set a red line,” he says. This is despite locals distancing themselves from the attack in Pahalgam. Kashmir Valley shut down on April 23rd as various political, religious and trade organisations protested against terrorism.

Second, Kashmiris may now struggle to earn a living. In 2020 residency cards became available for non-Kashmiris, as did the right to buy land and property. This happened to fit a long-standing Hindu-nationalist desire to rebalance the demography of the Muslim-majority region. But it was also supposed to bring investment to the province. Last year a record 3.5m tourists came to witness the mountains and meadows of Bollywood lore. The government credits this to the relative calm enforced on Kashmir since 2019.

Now, locals worry. A 48-year-old taxi driver in Pahalgam says the summer months used to make him \$900, or enough to pay his loans and keep his children in school for the rest of the year. With tourism set to plummet just before the high season, his sums no longer add up.

Finally, hopes of restoring Kashmir's statehood appear to be shelved—for now. Although the Supreme Court gave its blessing to the revocation of J&K's special status in 2023, it also ordered the government to reinstate the region's rights as a regular state. Critics believe that the volatile security situation has become the government's excuse for doing what it had hoped to do all along: ignore the order for the foreseeable future. ■