

# Attack puts fragile India-Pakistan ceasefire at risk

Killing of civilians in Kashmir could mark a perilous turning point

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**PAHALGAM, INDIAN-ADMINISTERED KASHMIR** — This Himalayan town, known locally as “mini-Switzerland,” would normally be bustling with tourists at this time of year, photographing fields of wildflowers and riding ponies beneath snowcapped peaks.

But on Wednesday, Pahalgam was eerily still. Schools and markets across Indian-administered Kashmir were shuttered. Cabs once packed with vacationers were stopped at security checkpoints on their way out of town. The violence of the previous day was still in the air.

On Tuesday, gunmen emerged from the forest with assault rifles and opened fire on tourists who had gathered in a popular meadow. At least 26 people — 25 Indians and one Nepalese citizen — were killed, police said. It was the deadliest attack on civilians in India in more than a decade.

Indian media blamed the attack on the Resistance Front, a militant group banned by New Delhi in 2023 as a terrorist organization, but there was no verifiable claim of responsibility.

The suddenness of the violence, and the gruesome nature of the killings, sent shock waves across the country, rekindling painful memories from the 1990s, when Kashmir was gripped by a bloody insurgency — and civilians often bore the cost.

India and Pakistan, nuclear-armed rivals that both claim Kashmir and administer separate parts of it, are now at a dangerous crossroad, analysts said, after years of diplomatic stagnation.

“We were in a bad place, and we weren’t actively getting worse,” said Srinath Raghavan, a historian and security analyst at Ashoka University. “Now, it will actively get worse.”

## ‘All bets are off’

The assault in Pahalgam risks unraveling a fragile ceasefire between India and Pakistan that was sealed through back-channel diplomacy in 2021.

The agreement halted oncedaily exchanges of fire along the Line of Control, the de facto border between Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir; the dispute over the territory has led to three wars between the countries.

“That is the last thread that remains in an otherwise very skeletal relationship,” said Hap-pymon Jacob, an international studies professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University. “If that gets damaged and ruptured, then all bets are off.”

Vikram Misri, India’s minister of foreign affairs, told reporters Wednesday that Pakistani nationals would be banned from traveling to India, Indian defense advisers would be withdrawn from Pakistan and a key water treaty between the countries would be put on hold. Pakistan’s energy minister condemned the move as “an act of water warfare.”

For decades, armed insurgents in Kashmir — some seeking independence, others favoring accession to Pakistan — have waged a separatist struggle against Indian control. The violence has ebbed in recent years amid an



MUKHTAR KHAN/AP

intense crackdown by Indian security forces, whom rights groups have accused of carrying out arbitrary detentions and extrajudicial killings against the Muslim-majority population.

Militants still launched periodic attacks against Indian soldiers, migrant workers and Hindus, but Tuesday’s targeted killings of civilians were an unprecedented escalation.

“Those responsible for the attacks and the people responsible will very soon feel a loud response,” Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh said Wednesday.

Though he did not mention Pakistan by name, the implication was clear, and other prominent figures were far more direct.

Shama Mohamed, a spokesperson for the opposition Congress party, said on X on Wednesday that “Rawalpindi should be flattened,” referring to the city where Pakistan’s military is headquartered. “Time to teach Pakistan a lesson they don’t forget,” she added.

India has long accused Islamabad of supporting separatist violence in Kashmir, and Indian security analysts said the perpetrators were probably linked to Lashkar-e-Taiba — the Pakistan-based militant organization that carried out the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, when gunmen killed 166 people and injured more than 300.

Indian politicians and analysts were quick to point to a speech last week by Pakistan’s army chief, Gen. Asim Munir, who called Kashmir the country’s “jugular vein,” adding, “We will not leave our Kashmiri brothers in their heroic struggle.”

Officials in Pakistan condemned Tuesday’s killings and rejected accusations of involvement. In a statement Wednesday, the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that it was “concerned at the loss of tourists’ lives.”

“We extend our condolences to the near ones of the deceased and wish the injured a speedy recovery,” the statement continued.

Pakistani Sen. Sherry Rehman



YAWAR NAZIR/GETTY IMAGES

**TOP: On patrol at Dal Lake in Srinagar, in Indian-controlled Kashmir, on Tuesday. ABOVE: Protesters in Srinagar on Wednesday hold Indian flags and shout anti-Pakistan slogans. BELOW: A funeral for one of the victims of Tuesday’s attack.**

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historian and security analyst at India’s Ashoka University



DAR YASIN/AP

the United States, to stop any escalation,” said Hasan Askari Rizvi, a Pakistani political analyst. “The United States definitely doesn’t want war.”

## Retaliation

The Indian government revoked Kashmir’s semiautonomous status in 2019 and imposed sweeping security measures. New Delhi hailed a return to relative stability, encouraged investment and trumpeted the return of tourists to the region.

Tuesday’s assault upended that narrative in an instant. “It’s misleading to tell your own citizens to come to this place and not ensure their safety and protection,” said Anuradha Bhasin, the managing editor of the Kashmir Times.

A hotel manager in Pahalgam, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he feared retaliation by the authorities, said he was hosting a family of 15 from Maharashtra this week. They were out sightseeing when the attack happened and rushed back to the hotel, he said, refusing to come out even for dinner.

“It took us years to build this trust, but now it is dented for years to come,” he said. “I cannot forget the look on their faces and their nightlong wails.”

Indian soldiers were out in force across Kashmir on Wednesday. A famous dry-fruit market on the Jammu-Srinagar highway, usually buzzing with tourists, was closed. In 2019, a suicide bomber killed more than 40 soldiers near the market. India retaliated with strikes in Pakistan — setting off a brief but nerve-racking aerial battle along the Line of Control.

In the aftermath, relations between the countries nosedived. Islamabad expelled India’s envoy, suspended trade and took its grievances to the United Nations. India refused to engage with Islamabad over Kashmir. Despite the 2021 ceasefire, the relationship has remained largely frozen.

Now, analysts said, New Delhi will be weighing how to retaliate.

Syed Akbaruddin, a former Indian diplomat at the United Nations, said the number and diversity of the victims, coming from all corners of India, made a military response more likely.

“It has hit a nerve which not many incidents of violence have,” he said. “There will be pressure to find the perpetrators and go after them.”

Modi will want to “show that India is strong,” Rizvi, the political analyst, predicted. “Pakistani forces are ready to face any such situation.”

There are concerns that the tragedy could also inflame tensions inside India. National media has directed its ire not just at Pakistan but in many cases at Muslims more broadly.

“The repercussions would not be borne by not just Kashmiris but also Muslims elsewhere in India,” said Bhasin, of the Kashmir Times.

India, meanwhile, will intensify its clampdown in Kashmir, analysts said, which will risk further fueling local backlash.

“There is a deepening resentment at the ground level, but it’s silenced because of the military jackboots,” said Bhasin. “Although that does not automatically translate into a violent reaction, it does give that a space to grow.”

Mehrotra reported from New Delhi. Shaiq Hussain in Islamabad contributed to this report.