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ATUL LOKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Afshana Farooq, who was nearly trampled during a protest in Srinagar, Kashmir. Witnesses said that people had been demonstrating peacefully when Indian forces opened fire.

Cut off from the world

SRINAGAR, KASHMIR

Kashmiris say lockdown by India is 'a living hell' of anger and fear

BY SAMEER YASIR,
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On the streets of Srinagar, Kashmir's biggest city, security officers tied black bandannas over their faces, grabbed their guns and took positions behind checkpoints. People glanced out the windows of their homes, afraid to step outside. Many were cutting back on meals and getting hungry.

A sense of coiled menace hung over the locked-down city and the wider region on Saturday, a day after a huge protest erupted into clashes between Kashmiris and Indian security forces.

Shops were shut. A.T.M.s had run dry. Just about all lines to the outside world — internet, mobile phones, even landlines — remained severed, rendering millions of people incommunicado.

A correspondent for The New York Times got one of the first inside views of life under lockdown in Kashmir and found a population that felt besieged, confused, frightened and furious by the



DANISH SIDDIQUI/REUTERS

A truck that Kashmiris said was damaged by security forces. Several Srinagar residents said they'd been beaten up by security forces for simply trying to buy necessities.

seismic events of last week.

People who ventured out said they had to beg officers to cross a landscape of sandbags, battered trucks and soldiers staring at them through metal face masks. Several residents said they had been beaten up by security forces for simply trying to buy necessities like milk.

India's swift and unilateral decision

last Monday to wipe out Kashmir's autonomy significantly raised tensions with its archrival, Pakistan, which also claims parts of Kashmir. The territory lying between the two nuclear-armed nations was already one of Asia's most dangerous and militarized flash points, smoldering for decades.

Anything dramatic or provocative that happens here — and India's move

was widely seen as both — instantly sends a jolt of anxiety across this entire region.

On Friday afternoon, witnesses said tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators were moving through the streets of Srinagar, chanting freedom slogans and waving Kashmiri flags, when Indian forces opened fire.

The huge crowd panicked and scattered. Sustained bursts of automatic weapon fire could be heard in videos filmed during the protest, and at least seven people were wounded, hospital officials said, some sprayed by buckshot in the eyes.

Afshana Farooq, a 14-year-old girl, was nearly trampled in the stampede.

"We were just marching peacefully after prayers," said her father, Farooq Ahmed, standing over her as she lay shaking in a Srinagar hospital bed. "Then they started shooting at us."

India has put Kashmir, home to about eight million people, in a tightening vise, after India's Hindu nationalist prime minister, Narendra Modi, swept away the autonomy that this mountainous, Muslim-majority region had enjoyed for decades.

His decision was years in the making, the collision of India's rising nationalist politics, frustration with Kashmir's dogged separatists and a long-running rivalry with Pakistan.

KASHMIR, PAGE 4

Cut off from the world: 'A living hell' of anger in Kashmir

KASHMIR, FROM PAGE 1

For the past three decades, the Kashmir Valley, part of the region controlled by India, has been a conflict zone, a restive area chafing for independence. In the 1990s, Pakistan opened the floodgates for jihadists to cross the border, setting off years of heavy fighting.

Many Kashmiris see India as an oppressive and foreign ruler. They resent all the changes over the years that have diluted what was supposed to be an autonomous arrangement for Kashmir, settled in 1947, when the region's maharajah agreed to join India with guarantees of some self-rule.

No one disputes that Kashmir needed change. Tens of thousands of people have been killed here and the economy lies in ruins.

Mr. Modi has said the new status will make Kashmir more peaceful and prosperous. In a televised speech on Thursday, which most Kashmiris could not watch because their television service had also been cut, he insisted that turning Kashmir into a federal territory would eliminate corruption, attract investment and move it "forward with new hopes."

In the valley, nearly all of about 50 Kashmiris interviewed said they expected India's actions to increase the sense of alienation and in turn feed the rebellion.

Elders in several rural areas reported that dozens of young men had already disappeared from their communities, often a sign of joining the insurgency.

Officials in New Delhi circulated photos on Saturday that showed open fruit markets and crowded streets, saying the valley was returning to normal. But security personnel in Kashmir said large protests kept erupting.

"At any point day or night," said Ravi Kant, a soldier based in the town of Baramulla, "whenever they get a chance, mobs of a dozen, two dozen, even more, sometimes with a lot of women, come out, pelt stones at us and run away."

"People are so angry," he added. "They are unrelenting and not scared."

Tens of thousands of troops from the Indian Army, the Central Reserve Police



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Protesters throwing stones in Srinagar, Kashmir. Kashmiris said they expected India's actions to increase the sense of alienation.

Force (a paramilitary unit) and the Jammu and Kashmir Police have been deployed in just about every corner of the valley. In some villages, even remote ones, a soldier was posted outside the gate of each family's home.

The difficulties of negotiating such a tight security cordon are compounding the stress. Shamima Bano, a middle-aged mother, broke into tears the instant she heard her son's voice over the phone.

"Are you alive?" she cried.

For hours, she had waited in a line of 400 people to use the one phone that the authorities opened, at a government office in her neighborhood. Her college-age son was in the Indian city of Mum-

bai, about to go into surgery, she said.

The lockdown's effects are visible everywhere. Schools have been closed. Parks are deserted. Baby food is running out. In many areas, residents needed to produce a curfew pass to leave their homes, even for medical emergencies.

At the Lala Ded hospital, sick people had traveled more than a day to get here, only to find a skeleton crew. Many doctors couldn't get to work. Many patients were curled up on the floor.

"It's a living hell here," said Jamila, a doctor who goes by one name.

Kashmiris said that of all the crackdowns they have lived through, this was the worst. A spokeswoman for India's

Home Ministry said Saturday she would answer questions about the complaints but had yet to provide a response.

Since the 1990s, Kashmir's insurgency has steadily dwindled. A few hundred young rebels roam the valley, poorly trained and outnumbered by an Indian force nearly 1,000 to one. But still, the Indians can't stomp them out.

Pakistan is widely suspected of covertly supporting some of these rebels, though to a much lesser extent than what it did in the 1990s. Pakistan controls a slice of Kashmir that is much smaller than the Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, which includes the Kashmir Valley and was India's only Muslim-majority state until Mr. Modi

downgraded it to a federal territory.

Decades ago, Jammu and Kashmir had its own prime minister, and Indians needed travel permits to visit. Before last week, the region had the power to frame its own laws.

"It was a full container, and they have made it empty, slowly, slowly," said Mohammed Latif Kotroo, the owner of one of Srinagar's signature houseboats, a tourist attraction that now floats empty.

Many Kashmiris fear that Mr. Modi's sweeping decision, which also wiped away a decades-old provision that gave Kashmiris special land ownership rights, will encourage millions of Hindu

Many Kashmiris see India as an oppressive and foreign ruler and resent the diluting of Kashmir's autonomy.

migrants from India to move into the valley, fabled for its stunning alpine scenery and fertile soil. Kashmiris fear they will be turned into a minority in their own land.

Indian officials deny this and say they don't want to destroy Kashmir's special character. But they have also said that the new status would make it easier for non-Kashmiris to buy land, which they argued would catalyze outside investment and lift the stagnant, war-torn economy.

India did not consult any Kashmiri leaders before revoking Kashmir's autonomy, which several Indian legal experts said could be unconstitutional. The original autonomy provisions said that any change to Kashmir's status must be done in consultation with Kashmiri representatives.

In the past week, the Indian authorities have arrested hundreds of Kashmiri activists, including some elected politicians. Constitutional lawyers predict the issue will end up in India's Supreme Court, which has shown some independence, if not in all cases, from the government.

Many Kashmiris have never trusted Mr. Modi. His government is deeply rooted in a Hindu nationalist worldview

that is extremely popular with India's Hindu majority — Mr. Modi won a thumping re-election in May — but has created great fear across India's Muslim minority.

Mr. Modi knew that stripping away what little autonomy Kashmir still enjoyed was not going to go down well with Kashmiris.

A few days before his government announced its plan, security officials suddenly evacuated thousands of Indian tourists. The reason, they said was a possible terrorist plot backed by Pakistan. Now, many Kashmiris say this was a pretext before the clampdown.

"They all lied, the governor, all of them," said Fayaz Ahmad, who runs a medicine shop.

Kashmiris are desperate to get information. But with the internet out and phones and television service disrupted, space has been created for the wildest rumors. A few small Kashmiri newspapers have continued unbowed, putting out thin paper editions — four pages, maybe eight — that are carefully passed hand to hand throughout the day.

Copies used to cost 3 rupees, or about 4 U.S. cents. Now they go for 50. There is no digital version.

Several people said they were feeling so anxious that they couldn't sleep.

"Sleep has vanished," Mr. Ahmad said. "We don't trust anyone."

Monday is Eid, one of the holiest days on the Muslim calendar. Many families are distressed that they can't celebrate it with out-of-town relatives — because they can't contact them — or go outside to purchase a sheep to sacrifice.

A herdsman in downtown Srinagar guarded a small flock of sheep on Friday, sitting on a patch of grass, waiting for customers who never came.

As a car carrying a reporter slowed down to approach him, he sprang up and jogged to the window.

"We are ready to pick up guns," he said, unprompted.

He then glanced at a pack of soldiers across the street and walked away.

Sameer Yasir and Suhasini Raj reported from Srinagar and Jeffrey Gettleman from New Delhi.