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Mehak Javid Bhat, 18, center, was preparing for medical school when her high school in Kashmir shut. Without internet or phone lines, her study for a critical exam is limited. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ATUL LOKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Desperate to return to school

KAPRAN, KASHMIR

Deep unrest in Kashmir is keeping 1.5 million children from their studies

BY SAMEER YASIR
AND JEFFREY GETTLEMAN

Every day, Aliya Khan, a fifth grader in Kashmir, steps out of her house and walks down a dirt lane lined by tall maple trees to check on what's happening at her school.

And every day, a few minutes later, she walks back to her house with her head hanging down, totally dejected. It has been three months, and no one knows when her school, like so many others in Kashmir, will reopen.

"I've told you, the school is shut," her mother, Rubeena Khan, scolded her the

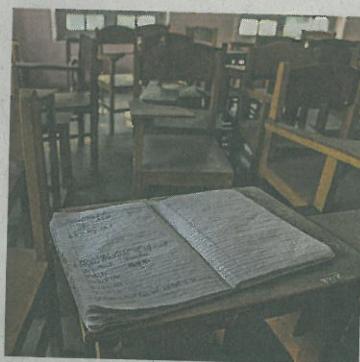
other day as Aliya walked inside. "Why do you keep going to look?"

Since early August, when India unilaterally revoked Kashmir's autonomy, education has stood as one of the most glaring casualties of the crisis.

At least 1.5 million Kashmiri students remain out of school. Virtually all private schools are closed, and most government schools are shut — one of the clearest signs of the fear that has gripped Kashmir since the Indian government locked down the disputed territory and separatist militants began carrying out attacks to disrupt its control.

The Indian government wants students to return, and teachers at the few open schools are reporting for duty. But their students are not: Officials estimate attendance at those schools to be around 3 percent.

Parents in the Kashmir Valley say they are terrified of sending their children out with troops everywhere and separatist militants on the prowl for



A notebook left behind. Parents fear violence in the disputed territory.

trouble. The militants are demanding that civilians boycott work and school, and they have killed several people to assert their resistance to tightening Indian rule.

In the past week, militants dragged construction workers onto the street and shot them, witnesses said, leaving five dead and one wounded. It was the deadliest single attack on civilians since Kashmir's autonomy was stripped.

"What if the school or a bus carrying children is attacked?" asked Saqib Mushtaq Bhat, a father worried about violence by Indian troops or militants. "What if there are protests and their faces get shot by pellets?"

He would never forgive himself, he said, so he keeps his three children home.

The result is fear, bewilderment, sullenness and boredom. Some of the older students worry that their dreams of becoming professionals are ruined. And many children said they were lonely and depressed, relegated to watching television for hours a day.

"There's nothing else" to do," said Reyhan Sofi, a fourth grader.

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