

India closes border with Pakistan after 26 people killed in Kashmir attack

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India yesterday closed a key land border with neighbouring Pakistan, cancelled a water-sharing treaty and barred its citizens from entry under a visa exemption scheme in the wake of Tuesday's attack by Islamic militants in Kashmir that killed 26 people.

The moves came as India's defence minister, Rajnath Singh, said those who had carried out and planned the Kashmir region's worst attack on civilians in years, including those working "behind the scenes", would be subjected to a swift response.

Announcing the downgrading of its relations with Pakistan, India's foreign secretary, Vikram Misri, told a media briefing that cross-border connections to the attack had been "brought out" at a special meeting of the security cabinet, after which it was decided to act.

Misri said India was suspending the Indus water treaty "until Pakistan credibly and irrevocably abjures its support for cross-border terrorism".

Pakistan has denied involvement in the attack and said its prime minister, Shehbaz Sharif, would chair a national security committee meeting today to respond.

Indian security forces yesterday fanned out across the Himalayan region of Kashmir as the army and police launched a massive manhunt for the perpetrators of the militant attack on Tuesday that killed 26 people, mostly tourists and all men.

Amid rapidly rising tensions in the region, which has been riven by militant violence since the start of an anti-Indian insurgency in 1989, survivors said the militants asked men they had rounded up to recite Islamic verses before executing those who could not do so.

Asavari Jagdale, who lives in the western Indian state of Maharashtra and lost her father and uncle in the attack, told local media that she and her family had hid inside a nearby tent along with other tourists when the shooting started.

When the militants reached their tent, Jagdale said, they asked her father, Santosh Jagdale, to come out and recite an Islamic verse.

"When he failed to do so, they pumped three bullets into him - one on the head, one behind the ear and another in the back," she said. "My uncle was next to me. The terrorists fired four to five bullets into him."

Debasish Bhattacharyya, a Hindu who is an associate professor at Assam University and who grew up in a Muslim neighbourhood in the state, said he had been spared because he was familiar with Islamic verses.

The militants ordered him and those nearby on to their knees and when the others started chanting the verses he followed along.

"I knew the words and, at that moment, it was probably the only way to save our lives. Those who failed were killed," he said, adding that they had fled after the gunmen left and trekked through a forest for two hours.

A little-known militant group, the Resistance Front, claimed responsibility for the attack. Posting on social media, it expressed discontent that more than 85,000 "outsiders" had been settled in the region, spurring a "demographic change".

The attack, reportedly involving four gunmen, took place in a meadow in the Pahalgam area of the scenic Himalayan federal territory. The victims included 25 Indians and one Nepalese national, the worst attack on civilians in India since the 2008 Mumbai shootings.

The prime minister, Narendra Modi, cut short a two-day visit to Saudi Arabia and returned to New Delhi yesterday morning.

Modi held a meeting with his national security adviser, the foreign minister and other senior

officials at the airport, and a special security cabinet meeting was called for later yesterday.

The attack is being viewed as a major escalation in the regional conflict, in which attacks targeting tourists have been rare. The last deadly incident took place in June, when at least nine people were killed and 33 injured after militants caused a bus carrying Hindu pilgrims to plunge into a deep gorge.

In a fresh statement yesterday, the Resistance Front said that those attacked on Tuesday "were not ordinary tourists; instead, they were linked to and affiliated with Indian security agencies".

The attack prompted an immediate exodus of tourists from the region, with airlines operating extra flights from Srinagar, the summer capital of the territory. Local television showed tourists carrying their luggage to taxis and filing out of a hotel in Srinagar.

The attack occurred during a four-day visit to India by the US vice-president, JD Vance, who called it a "devastating terrorist attack".

Omar Abdullah, the chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir, posted on social media: "It's heartbreaking to see the exodus of our guests from the [Kashmir] valley after yesterday's tragic terror attack in Pahalgam."

He added: "But at the same time, we totally understand why people would want to leave."

There has been an increase in the number of targeted killings of Hindus, including migrant workers from other Indian states, in the disputed Himalayan region since Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party government unilaterally revoked Kashmir's limited autonomy in 2019 by imposing a communication blockade and jailing activists and political leaders.

It split the state into two federally administered territories - Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh - and allowed local authorities to issue domicile certificates to outsiders, enabling them to apply for jobs and buy land. Since then, civil liberties and media freedom in the region have been severely curtailed.

Pakistan's ministry of foreign affairs spokesperson, Shafqat Khan, issued a statement saying Pakistan was "concerned about the loss of tourists' lives in the attack", and extended condolences to the victims.



▲ Top, a former chief minister of the state, Mehbooba Mufti, leads a rally after the attack. Above, burning tyres block a street in Jammu

Additional reporting **Reuters**