

India's Muslims Fear Deepening Backlash After Kashmir Attack

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NEW DELHI — Widespread detentions and demolitions of property targeting Muslims in India have provoked concerns that right-wing Hindu nationalists are exploiting last week's terrorist attack in Kashmir to deepen a campaign of oppression against the country's largest minority group.

Public anger has swelled after 26 people — all but one of them Hindu tourists — were killed by militants near the town of Pahalgam in the Indian-administered part of Kashmir, a Muslim-majority region. India has said that Pakistan had a supporting hand in the attack, an accusation that Pakistan denies.

India has appeared to be preparing to strike Pakistan militarily in response to the terrorist attack, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi vowing to hunt down the terrorists and “raze” their safe havens. A Pakistani government minister said on Tuesday that Pakistan believed an Indian strike was imminent.

So far, India's central government has been focused on carrying out a series of punitive measures against Pakistan, including

threatening to disrupt the flow of cross-border rivers. But officials and right-wing Hindu groups have intensified harassment of Muslims, which they have framed as a drive against illegal migrants.

In several states run by Mr. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, local officials have used the moment to hound what they call “illegal Bangladeshis” and Rohingyas, the Muslim minority who have fled Myanmar. Such labels, including “Pakistani,” are often used to target Muslim migrants from other parts of India.

The killings of Muslims were reported in two states, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka, with media reports suggesting they were hate crimes.

Inside Kashmir, security forces have arrested hundreds as they seek the perpetrators of the April 22 attack, and they have blown up the homes of people they have accused of having terrorist affiliations. The sweeps, which have included the detention of 2,000 people according to one official, resemble the collective punishments that the authorities have previously carried out after attacks on security forces in Kashmir.

Kashmiris in other states have reported harassment and violence, with right-wing groups filming themselves assaulting Kashmiri roadside salesmen and



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In Gujarat, India, the government razed an area it said was occupied illegally by Bangladeshis. Activists say painting Indian Muslims as Bangladeshi is an old trope used by the Hindu ruling party.

threatening violence if Kashmiris do not leave.

“The attack in Pahalgam was horrible but should not become a pretext to engage in reprisals and attacks on minorities, including arbitrary arrests or summary punishments,” said Meenakshi Ganguly, the deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

Ms. Ganguly said that “ultra-nationalist broadcast networks and social media users have been inciting hate” that has resulted in violence.

The immediate backlash after the terrorist attack was targeted at Kashmiris and soon spread to a wider anti-Muslim sentiment.

That, analysts said, has furthered a demonization of Muslims that Mr. Modi's party has long employed to unite India's Hindu majority.

In the days after the attack, Kashmiri students studying in cities around India reported harassment and threats. Kashmir's top elected official, Omar Abdullah, sent government ministers to different cities to help “ensure the safety and well-being” of Kashmiris.

In Uttar Pradesh, a Muslim restaurant worker was shot dead and another injured on April 23. The attackers, declaring themselves members of a Hindu group,

released a video claiming responsibility and saying “I swear on Mother India that I will average the 26 with 2,600 of them.” (The state's police, however, said the killing was related to a dispute over food.)

In Karnataka, another Muslim man was lynched for chanting pro-Pakistan slogans, according to local news reports.

The most sweeping action has come in Gujarat.

On Monday, the state's police chief said his officers had arrested 6,500 “suspected Bangladeshi citizens.” Videos of the detention drive showed the men being moved through the streets inside

cordons of ropes.

In an indication of how indiscriminate the arrests were, the police chief said that only 450 of the detainees had so far been found to be illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

The government in Gujarat also announced a demolition drive at a Muslim slum near a lake, showing drone footage of bulldozers and dump trucks lined up for an operation that it said involved more than 2,000 police officers. By Tuesday evening, the state's home minister, Harsh Sanghavi, said that about 2,000 huts had been razed in a drive against “illegal Bangladeshis.”

Harsh Mander, a social activist, said that painting Indian Muslims as “Bangladeshi” was an old trope used by Mr. Modi's party.

Court petitions by residents asking for a pause were denied on Tuesday, as the government had made a national security argument.

The petitioners argued that they were citizens of India with documentation and had lived in the area for decades. They acknowledged that the demolitions had taken place in an area the government claimed was public land, but said they had happened without prior notice or due process.

Petitioners in the Gujarati city of Ahmedabad said that those detained had been subjected to “custodial violence, atrocities and humiliation,” despite police soon realizing that “more than 90 percent of those who are detained” were Indian citizens.

The actions against Muslims, Mr. Mander said, “are all signs of what the state is doing to use its power and authority in ways that are unlawful and unconstitutional against a particular community.”

Suhasini Raj, Showkat Nanda and Pragati K.B. contributed reporting.