

Kashmir attack prompts fury and tourist exodus

Hindu civilians targeted in atrocity that has brought India to brink of war with Pakistan

JYOTSNA SINGH — SRINAGAR
KRISHN KAUSHIK AND JOHN REED
NEW DELHI

Girish Sharma and his wife, Prema, had been relaxing in the serene meadows of Pahalgam, Kashmir, with their six-year-old son — a dream vacation in a bustling beauty spot close to the snow-capped Himalayas.

But within a day of their leaving Pahalgam, gunmen had on Tuesday opened fire and killed 26 people, all but one of them tourists. The attack has prompted shock, grief and anger in India and brought the country to the brink of conflict with Pakistan, which New Delhi accuses of supporting terrorism in Kashmir.

As news spread on social media and TV, the Sharmas were horrified to see images of bullet-punctured bodies and women and children screaming for help. One image stood out, that of a young woman named Himanshi kneeling next to the body of her dead husband, a naval officer named Vinay Narwal. The two had been married barely a week.

“How could this happen in such a heavily guarded region?” Prema, 40, said, in the regional capital, Srinagar. “We made the plan to come to Kashmir two months ago because people said it was peaceful and normal.”

Indians are now demanding accountability for those responsible for the country's worst terrorist attack on civilians since the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and asking how this could have happened in a region with such a heavy security presence.

Narendra Modi, India's prime minister, has vowed to exact revenge, saying New Delhi would “identify, track and punish every terrorist and their backers” and “pursue them to the end of the earth”.

India and Pakistan both claim all of Kashmir and occupy part of it, with New Delhi blaming Islamabad for funding and aiding terrorism on its side of the Line of Control that bisects the disputed territory.

New Delhi has said there were “cross-border linkages” between Islamabad and the militants. Police in Jammu and Kashmir released sketches of three suspects. Two are Pakistani nationals and one a Kashmiri. The police named them



Empty vessels: Kashmiri boatmen hold anti-terror posters in Srinagar on Thursday. Below, a paramilitary trooper stands guard in the city

Yawar Nazir/Getty Images; Tauseef Mustafa/AFP/Getty



as “LeT terrorists”, a reference to Lashkar e Tayyiba, the militant group responsible for the Mumbai attacks in which 166 people died.

India has now closed its land border with Pakistan, expelled Pakistani diplomats and suspended a treaty on the Indus river basin under which the two states have shared water since 1960.

Pakistan's government denies responsibility and, in response to New Delhi's actions, has closed its airspace to Indian airlines and suspended a 1972 peace treaty. It described any blocking or

diversion of water, in contravention of the Indus Water Agreement by India, as an “act of war”.

The targeting of Hindus in a Hindu-majority country has contributed to visceral public outrage. The gunmen chose their victims, targeting non-Muslim men, according to two Indian security officials. They shot many in the head at point-blank range, the officials said.

Anushka Mone, who lost her husband and two other relatives in the attack, told TV channel ABP news that the gunmen “were asking the Hindus and Muslims to stand separately, but nobody responded”, she told the TV station.

In India, there has been a backlash against Muslims and Kashmiri youth. Kashmiri students living in at least nine cities outside of Kashmir have either been physically attacked or received death threats from rightwing Hindu groups this week, according to Nasir Khuehami, convener of the J&K Students Association.

The atrocity is being seen as a national tragedy and a political setback for Modi, who since 2019 brought what many Indians saw as an unruly and violent rogue territory to heel by stripping it of its status as a state and cracking down

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Prema Sharma, tourist

on dissent with mass arrests. Since then, violence has been limited to small-scale “encounters” between separatist insurgents and Indian troops. Tourists, mostly from India, began to return.

“By going after the softest of targets, which is tourism in Kashmir, I think the attempt has been to show that these claims of normality are questionable,” said Srinath Raghavan, a military historian and former army officer.

At an all-party meeting in New Delhi on Thursday, the government acknowledged there had been security lapses, according to two people familiar with the details.

Tourists fled the Kashmir valley this week, with Indian airlines launching extra flights to ferry people out and inbound flights operating half-empty. In Srinagar, the regional capital, newly built hotels stand quiet.

Kashmiris have strongly condemned the attack and some were wondering how the militants could have carried it out. “If Kashmiri people are not involved, then who is behind it?” said Junaid Dar, a hotel employee in Srinagar. “We keep hearing about ‘unknown gunmen’. We want to know who these unknown gunmen are.”