

Without internet, Kashmir grinds to a halt

MUMBAI, INDIA

Pharmacists can't restock and banks can't dispense money during shutdown

BY VINDU GOEL,
KARAN DEEP SINGH
AND SAMEER YASIR

Masroor Nazir, a pharmacist in Kashmir's biggest city, Srinagar, has some advice for people in the region: Do not get sick, because he may not have any medicine left to help.

"We used the internet for everything," said Mr. Nazir, 28, whose pharmacy is near the city's famed clock tower. He said he normally went online to order new drugs and to fulfill requests from other pharmacies in more rural parts of the Kashmir Valley. But now, "we cannot do anything."

Kashmir has become paralyzed since the Indian government shut down internet and phone service in the contested region on Aug 5.

India announced on Friday that the restrictions would be eased over the next few days, with schools and government offices to reopen on Monday and phone service to be gradually restored.

But in recent days, deep into the second week of the shutdown, shopkeepers said that vital supplies like insulin and baby food, which they typically ordered online, were running out. Cash was scarce, as metal shutters covered the doors and windows of banks and A.T.M.s, which relied on the internet for every transaction. Doctors said they could not communicate with their patients.

Only a few government locations with landlines have been available for the public to make phone calls, with long waits to get a few minutes of access.

The information blockade was an integral part of India's unilateral decision to wipe out the autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir, an area of 12.5 million people that is claimed by both India and Pakistan and has long been a source of tension. That has brought everyday transactions, family communications, online entertainment and the flow of money and information to a halt.

While Prime Minister Narendra Modi has promoted the rapid adoption of the internet, particularly on smartphones, to modernize India and bring it out of poverty, the country is also the world leader in shutting down the internet.

The country has increasingly deployed communications and internet stoppages to suppress potential protests, prevent rumors from spreading on WhatsApp, conduct elections and even stop students from cheating on exams. Last year, India blocked the internet 134 times, compared with 12 shutdowns in Pakistan, the No. 2 country, according to Access Now, a global digital rights group, which said its data understates the number of occurrences.

"Shutting down the internet has become the first go-to the moment the police think there will be any kind of disturbance," said Mishi Choudhary, founder of SFLC.in, a legal advocacy group in New Delhi that has tracked the sharp rise in web shutdowns in India since 2012.

In Jammu and Kashmir, a Muslim-majority territory where security forces constantly worry about attacks by separatist militants, the internet has been



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ATUL LOKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Motorcycles navigating barbed wire in Srinagar, nearly two weeks after India rescinded Kashmir's autonomy. Below, Masroor Nazir, a pharmacist in Srinagar, said without the internet he can't order new drugs.

nies to stop providing access to the web or to mobile networks.

But this latest shutdown has been far more sweeping than others, Kashmiris said.

Umar Qayoom, who used to spend his days running around Srinagar signing up merchants for Paytm, a digital payments service, is now stuck in his house. He said he had not been able to contact his girlfriend since the shutdown began, and his smartphone — his primary source of entertainment, with its end-

"I don't know when to sleep, when to wake up, what to do with my life. There is no life without internet."

less supply of videos and social media — is an inert hunk of metal.

"I don't know when to sleep, when to wake up, what to do with my life," he said during a rare foray outside on Monday evening for Eid al-Adha, the holiest festival in Islam. "There is no life without internet, even in Kashmir."

Muheet Mehraj, founder and chief executive of Kashmir Box, a start-up that buys traditional handicrafts like nash-

ees are idle. He worried that if the shutdown wore on, they would soon be out of work.

"We've seen more than 400 shutdowns," he said. "This has been the worst of them all."

It is far from the longest, though. In 2016, the internet was blocked in Kashmir for more than four months. The unpredictable access wreaked havoc with students, businesses and even musicians, who had relied on YouTube, Instagram and other digital services to reach potential audiences.

The United Nations has repeatedly condemned government-ordered internet shutdowns as a violation of human rights.

But that has not deterred India from routinely using the tool. Under India's laws, the authorities at even the local level can easily shut down internet access in the name of ensuring "peace and tranquility."

"It helps in any kind of situation which can flare up the sentiments of people and flare up the bulk mobilization of people," said Rahul Pandey, deputy superintendent of police in Darjeeling in northeastern India, where the internet was blocked for about 100 days in 2017.

Ramanjit Singh Chima, Asia-Pacific



But the true costs of such blockades are high.

Internet shutdowns from 2012 to 2017 cost India's economy more than \$3 billion, the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations estimated last year. And the number of stoppages has spiked since then.

The Darjeeling shutdown, one of the

forces.

Darjeeling's fabled tea industry, the lifeblood of the local economy, lost most of a year's harvest as workers went on strike. Production was hurt the next year, too.

Many corporate tea buyers and traders sought tea elsewhere during the disruption and never came back, said

dropped more than 30 percent at the time. "Even when the internet is on, people think that this business is probably shut down."

The government has argued that one reason for suppressing the internet in Kashmir was to stop the spread of false information.

But in the digital blackout, rumors have continued spreading the old-fashioned way: by word of mouth.

When thousands of protesters marched through Srinagar on Aug. 9 and security forces fired gunshots in response, word spread that there had been a massacre. Reporters who investigated found that at least seven people had been injured, but no one had died.

Other unverified reports of people being killed by the police have also circulated.

The enforced idleness creates another risk, said Mr. Qayoom, the Paytm employee stuck at home. When young people have nothing else to do, leaving the house to protest — or throw stones at the police — looks a lot more appealing.

"There is going to be bloodshed," he said.

Vindu Goel reported from Mumbai, and

vice for people in the region: Do not get sick, because he may not have any medicine left to help.

"We used the internet for everything," said Mr. Nazir, 28, whose pharmacy is near the city's famed clock tower. He said he normally went online to order new drugs and to fulfill requests from other pharmacies in more rural parts of the Kashmir Valley. But now, "we cannot do anything."

Kashmir has become paralyzed since the Indian government shut down internet and phone service in the contested region on Aug 5.

India announced on Friday that the restrictions would be eased over the next few days, with schools and government offices to reopen on Monday and phone service to be gradually restored.

But in recent days, deep into the second week of the shutdown, shopkeepers said that vital supplies like insulin and baby food, which they typically ordered online, were running out. Cash was scarce, as metal shutters covered the doors and windows of banks and A.T.M.s, which relied on the internet for every transaction. Doctors said they could not communicate with their patients.

Only a few government locations with landlines have been available for the public to make phone calls, with long waits to get a few minutes of access.

The information blockade was an integral part of India's unilateral decision to wipe out the autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir, an area of 12.5 million people that is claimed by both India and Pakistan and has long been a source of tension. That has brought everyday transactions, family communications, online entertainment and the flow of money and information to a halt.

While Prime Minister Narendra Modi has promoted the rapid adoption of the internet, particularly on smartphones, to modernize India and bring it out of poverty, the country is also the world leader in shutting down the internet.

The country has increasingly deployed communications and internet stoppages to suppress potential protests, prevent rumors from spreading on WhatsApp, conduct elections and even stop students from cheating on exams. Last year, India blocked the internet 134 times, compared with 12 shutdowns in Pakistan, the No. 2 country, according to Access Now, a global digital rights group, which said its data understates the number of occurrences.

"Shutting down the internet has become the first go-to the moment the police think there will be any kind of disturbance," said Mishi Choudhary, founder of SFCL.in, a legal advocacy group in New Delhi that has tracked the sharp rise in web shutdowns in India since 2012.

In Jammu and Kashmir, a Muslim-majority territory where security forces constantly worry about attacks by separatist militants, the internet has been blocked in at least part of the region 54 times this year, according to SFCL.in's data. The authorities simply order internet service providers and phone compa-



Motorcycles navigating barbed wire in Srinagar, nearly two weeks after India rescinded Kashmir's autonomy. Below, Masroor Nazir, a pharmacist in Srinagar, said without the internet he can't order new drugs.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ATUL LOKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

nies to stop providing access to the web or to mobile networks.

But this latest shutdown has been far more sweeping than others, Kashmiris said.

Umar Qayoom, who used to spend his days running around Srinagar signing up merchants for Paytm, a digital payments service, is now stuck in his house. He said he had not been able to contact his girlfriend since the shutdown began, and his smartphone — his primary source of entertainment, with its end-

"I don't know when to sleep, when to wake up, what to do with my life. There is no life without internet."

less supply of videos and social media — is an inert hunk of metal.

"I don't know when to sleep, when to wake up, what to do with my life," he said during a rare foray outside on Monday evening for Eid al-Adha, the holiest festival in Islam. "There is no life without internet, even in Kashmir."

Muheet Mehraj, founder and chief executive of Kashmir Box, a start-up that buys traditional handicrafts like pashmina shawls and pottery from local artisans and sells them online, said he could not check incoming orders or communicate with his suppliers. His 25 employ-

ees are idle. He worried that if the shutdown wore on, they would soon be out of work.

"We've seen more than 400 shutdowns," he said. "This has been the worst of them all."

It is far from the longest, though. In 2016, the internet was blocked in Kashmir for more than four months. The unpredictable access wreaked havoc with students, businesses and even musicians, who had relied on YouTube, Instagram and other digital services to reach potential audiences.

The United Nations has repeatedly condemned government-ordered internet shutdowns as a violation of human rights.

But that has not deterred India from routinely using the tool. Under India's laws, the authorities at even the local level can easily shut down internet access in the name of ensuring "peace and tranquility."

"It helps in any kind of situation which can flare up the sentiments of people and flare up the bulk mobilization of people," said Rahul Pandey, deputy superintendent of police in Darjeeling in northeastern India, where the internet was blocked for about 100 days in 2017.

Raman Jit Singh Chima, Asia-Pacific policy director at Access Now, said that Indian officials have seen few negative consequences from shutdowns, so they keep using them.



But the true costs of such blockades are high.

Internet shutdowns from 2012 to 2017 cost India's economy more than \$3 billion, the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations estimated last year. And the number of stoppages has spiked since then.

The Darjeeling shutdown, one of the longest in the country, occurred after the state government decided it needed to quash a separatist movement that had clashed violently with security

forces.

Darjeeling's fabled tea industry, the lifeblood of the local economy, lost most of a year's harvest as workers went on strike. Production was hurt the next year, too.

Many corporate tea buyers and traders sought tea elsewhere during the disruption and never came back, said Girish Sarda, director of Nathmulls, a tea exporter in the region.

"We lost many customers," he said, estimating that the company's revenue

dropped more than 30 percent at the time. "Even when the internet is on, people think that this business is probably shut down."

The government has argued that one reason for suppressing the internet in Kashmir was to stop the spread of false information.

But in the digital blackout, rumors have continued spreading the old-fashioned way: by word of mouth.

When thousands of protesters marched through Srinagar on Aug. 9 and security forces fired gunshots in response, word spread that there had been a massacre. Reporters who investigated found that at least seven people had been injured, but no one had died.

Other unverified reports of people being killed by the police have also circulated.

The enforced idleness creates another risk, said Mr. Qayoom, the Paytm employee stuck at home. When young people have nothing else to do, leaving the house to protest — or throw stones at the police — looks a lot more appealing.

"There is going to be bloodshed," he said.

Vindu Goel reported from Mumbai, and Karan Deep Singh and Sameer Yasir from Srinagar, Kashmir. Hari Kumar, Suhasini Raj and Kai Schultz contributed reporting from New Delhi.