

# India-Pakistan cross-border barrages exact an appalling human toll

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Despite claims by US officials and the international media that tensions between India and Pakistan have eased, there are few signs of any relaxation along the border between the two countries.

Since the huge military mobilisation last December, following an attack on the Indian parliament by armed Kashmiri separatists, exchanges of artillery, mortar and small arms fire have been daily occurrences. Scores of people have been killed on both sides of the border, many more have been injured and hundreds of thousands of villagers have been forced to flee their homes and fields.

The latest reports indicate that at least six people died in heavy firing across the border on Wednesday. Indian officials announced that two army officers and a civilian had been killed by Pakistani mortar and machine gun fire. Pakistan reported that two women and a 10-year-old boy had been killed by Indian mortar fire.

The incidents are treated as routine and are reported in no more than a few lines. On Tuesday, Pakistani newspapers announced that five people had died and four civilians were wounded as a result of Indian artillery barrages on villages in Pakistan-held Kashmir. The official death toll on the Pakistani side over the first 11 days in June was 91.

A similar picture emerges in Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir. On June 11, India claimed that a Pakistani attack injured three civilians and hit an airport in Poonch. One died and several were injured in another attack on June 9. Such reports stretch back over months and the real casualties figures are probably understated.

The death toll on both sides of the border is, however, just one expression of the grim reality facing millions of often poor villagers. Vast areas of the Punjab wheat bowl have been made uncultivable by land mines planted by the Indian and Pakistani armies. Local villagers and cattle have been killed and injured by accidentally stepping on the mines.

Villagers in the border area of Indian-held Kashmir recently told Reuters that the situation was the worst at any time since the 1971 war between India and Pakistan. "In most cases one or two members of the family have stayed back to look after the belongings while women and children moved to safer places," Balkar Singh said. A doctor in the town of Valtoha explained that the number of people injured in land mines had increased due to panic movement amid more extensive mining.

In Gharkwal in Indian-held Jammu, just a couple of hundred metres from the border, 2,400 people climb into carts every evening and spend the night at a forest hostel in the nearby jungle.

According to a reporter, the villagers ignored government warnings and broke into the hostel building, where they feel somewhat safer than in their wattle and daub huts. "What will happen to our buffaloes? Will we be ever able to go back to our homes?" they asked.

Some people only leave their homes after dark. They have built their own versions of bunkers where they spend the day. These "bunkers" are often only pits a couple of metres deep that have been widened at the base to make a primitive shelter. Others just use the refuges during artillery barrages, which can last for hours. Even then, the bunkers only offer limited protection. In Gharkwal, shrapnel killed a young girl during a mortar attack that struck the family compound.

Hundreds of thousands have fled the border areas and are housed in often appalling conditions in makeshift refugee camps or are forced to live out in the open. Sections of the Indian subcontinent are currently experiencing heat wave conditions with daytime temperatures reaching as high as 50 degrees Celsius.

Reuters reported this week that the Indian village of Deoli, just 20 kilometres from Pakistan, was providing shelter for 200 families who had left their homes in Jabowal, 500 metres from the border. They were packed into four or five rooms of the local school and a few tents. Their crops were withering. A few returned each day to feed the cattle which could not be left untethered because much of the area is heavily mined.

One villager, Tirath Ram, commented: "The chances of this fighting stopping are very remote. We have lived with this for eight years now. Earlier it used to be just machine guns, but now it's mortar. We can't live in our homes any more." Another, Ram Lal, added: "It's difficult to live here in the camp. But at least it's safe. We don't have to dive into the mud and crawl in it 25 times a day, each time we hear the firing."

An article in the *Kashmir Times* on June 11 was critical of the Indian government's efforts to assist the refugees. "Many of them are forced to stay outdoors just in the open ground even as [the] mercury crossed the 45 degree Celsius mark and fresh showers lashed Jammu late last evening. No rooms. No tents and nowhere to go. At Sua No 1 [camp], where no less than 500 border migrants are seeking 'shelter', the first batch of tents came only last week, which is more than 10 days after they were left under the open blue sky to fend for themselves. Half of them are still without this privilege [of tents]..."

"Most of them [the refugees] are farmers and accustomed to a

bountiful yield of wheat or rice stacked in sacks in store-houses. They now wait for their measly monthly relief package that consists of seven kilograms of flour, two kilograms of rice and 10 litres of kerosene per person. Though the authorities claim that this relief is adequate for the migrants, the displaced persons say just the contrary.”

According to the Divisional Commissioner, about 70,000 people have recently been displaced in the Jammu region alone. They are housed in 91 camps, mostly government buildings. In addition to the rations of food and kerosene, each person receives 200 rupees—or just \$US4 a month. Many of the camps do not even have adequate electricity and water. “We lack everything in this camp. From bathrooms to toilets, from electricity to water and from education to health, we lack everything,” one woman explained.

Just over the border in Pakistan-controlled territory, conditions are just as bad. The *Los Angeles Times*, reporting from the border town of Chakothei on June 13, cited the comments of Brigadier Iftikhar Ali Khan who explained: “It’s every bit as volatile as it was two or three weeks ago.” He said that there had been no discernable decline in sporadic artillery shelling or small arms fire.

On May 18, Chakothei was subject to intense shelling. Khan claimed that the Indian army had sent 600 to 800 shells crashing into the town. A number of rounds hit the army administrative centre and several hit a nearby secondary school. At least one building was damaged but no one was killed at the school where students and staff retreated into underground bunkers. But a local woman Nazeen Bibi was killed in the first barrage as she attempted to cross a field.

Both India and Pakistan have cracked down on basic democratic rights, as part of the military buildup.

In Jammu and Kashmir, the Indian government has over decades used the most repressive methods to stifle opposition from the Muslim majority in the state. The lack of democracy along with extensive poverty and lack of services have been major contributing factors to the growth of armed militia groups seeking an end to Indian rule in Kashmir.

An Associated Press report last week described the situation in Srinagar, the state’s summer capital. “Daily life is constantly disrupted in ways large and small by the presence of tens of thousands of police and soldiers... There is no formal curfew, but anyone on the street at night risks being mistaken for a militant and shot by soldiers.

“In daylight, patrolling police and soldiers are rarely far from sight. One street corner after another is marked by sandbagged concrete bunkers. On major thoroughfares, police officers make random vehicle stops and check documents. Civilian movement is tightly curtailed in areas where soldiers and their families are housed.”

A college professor, Farooq Shah commented: “It’s stifling—you actually feel you cannot breathe. You can never escape the sense of insecurity and conflict, not for a moment. You can be on your way to buy bread or milk, just some normal task, and anything can happen.”

The constant pressure since the outbreak of armed conflict in Kashmir in the late 1980s has led to a huge rise in psychiatric illnesses. An article in the *New York Times* explained: “In 1990,

about 1,700 men and women sought help in Srinagar at the Psychiatric Diseases Hospital, a run-down facility where bare light bulbs hang from exposed wires in the director’s office. Last year, the number seeking help was 47,828, according to hospital records.”

Over the past decade, Indian security forces have detained thousands of people accused of helping armed Kashmiri separatist groups. Many have been held for years without trial. Human rights organisations have accused the Indian police and army of torture, rape and summary executions.

In the name of fighting terrorism, the Indian government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has recently pushed through draconian new legislation known as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), which provides wide powers to outlaw organisations and arrest without trial.

Last weekend police arrested Saeed Ali Shah Geelani, a leading figure in the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), under the POTA provisions and flew him to a high security prison in eastern India. He has been accused, without any evidence being produced, of illegally receiving money for armed militia groups. The APHC is an umbrella group of legal opposition parties in Jammu and Kashmir.

In Pakistan, at the behest of the US, the military regime of General Pervez Musharraf has cracked down on Islamic fundamentalist groups. A number of organisations, some of which sponsor anti-Indian fighters in Kashmir, have been banned and their public offices closed. Since the beginning of the year, hundreds of people have been accused of belonging to outlawed groups and detained.

Both Musharraf and Vajpayee have exploited the current war drive to divert public attention from their record at home and to shore up their fragile administrations. While the anti-democratic measures are purportedly being used to round up Islamic militants, neither leader would have any compunction in resorting to the same means to crush their political opponents. Their scant regard for democratic rights mirrors the contempt for human life shown by the military high commands as they subject border villages to their daily barrages.



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