

# Tragedy of beleaguered Kashmiris

22/9/04 **Mubarik Shah**

**T**he sudden stridency in Indian rhetoric against Pakistan has taken many here by surprise and left them wondering what has propelled New Delhi on to this. For, now that the Indians have fenced the LoC, where they also have installed ground sensors, it is hard to chew their allegations of cross-border infiltration.

In any case, the Kashmiris have throughout debunked the charge as a cover-up. They contend the Indian soldiers often kill their own innocent sons in fake encounters and then tout them up to be infiltrators. Some 100,000 Kashmiris have so far been slain. And even rare Indian objective accounts admit not a single Kashmiri family is left without a personal grief.

Yet, the tragedy of these beleaguered Kashmiris remains largely untold. Over the past 15 years, India is keeping the territory mostly under blanket, not allowing in international monitors or observers. And although India hosts a huge foreign media corps, independent reporting on Kashmir is only sporadic. The news on the territory comes primarily from Indian security officials, whose authenticity is anybody's guess.

This official news monopoly has indeed helped India to hedge many a hideous reality in occupied Kashmir. For one, the real authority in the territory is not the civilian administration but the over 750,000-strong Indian military, with the three corps commanders of Srinagar, Jammu and Leh calling the shots in their regions. Even the state police's special task forces report to them and they hold the veto power on all internal security matters.

A raft of special laws invests this military with sweeping powers to search, detain and shoot to kill. These laws are as draconian as the one that recently triggered an angry demonstration in front of Assam Rifles headquarters in Imphal, capital of insurgency-infested Indian state of Manipur, by a group of naked women carrying the banner: "Indian Army Rape Us". They were outraged at the murder of a Manipuri woman by the troops, who had arrested and taken her to their camp where they also raped her. The army claimed she was an insurgent; the protestors swore she was not.

Scores of Kashmiri women have similarly been raped and molested by the Indian troops, and with impunity. The Indian authorities always assert they take action against human rights violations by their troops. But the Kashmiris contend they do not. And even the courts in the territory have complained many a time on record that the military routinely defies their orders.

Hundreds of Kashmiri political prisoners are languishing in jails for years, without trial. Some 8,000 Kashmiri youth taken away by the army years ago still remain untraced. Their distressed mothers have grouped under the banner of Mothers of

Disappeared Sons to press their demand for knowing their whereabouts. But whenever they gather to agitate, gun-totting security personnel chase them away. Also going unnoticed is the frequent use of Kashmiri youth by the army as human shields to detect mines on highways.

At times, the military's shenanigans become public, but only by chance as it happened to the horrific Chattisinghpura Sikh massacre on the eve of former American President, Clinton's visit to India. Even as the local people were pointing finger at the nearby military camp, the Indian officialdom instantly blamed "Pakistan-sponsored infiltrators" for the slaughter. And within days security forces claimed having killed in an encounter all five of them. But the local people came up with compelling evidence that the slain were their own innocent relations. The DNA tests upheld their contention when the state authorities exhumed their bodies after strong public agitation.

But such chances are few and far between. For the most part, the military is getting away with extra-judicial killings, rapes and tortures of the Kashmiris. And so are the thuggish counter-insurgents it had trained, armed and bankrolled. Some 6,000 of them, they were recruited from amongst captured militants and imprisoned criminals by a serving army lieutenant general tasked to raise local killer squads to take on Kashmiri freedom fighters. But they took to robbing, killing and raping the civilians.

For their depravity, the army itself refused to take them in when they were disbanded to induct in regular forces. Even Indian paramilitaries, despite their own notorious record, reluctantly accepted only a few. The rest were thrown together to form up the state police's special task force to emerge as a dreaded instrument of state terrorism, drawing a poll pledge from incumbent chief minister Mufti Sayeed to disband it. But the army snubbed his move to send it packing, leaving the hapless Kashmiris to keep squirming under this wild force's wickedness.

Another Kashmiris' tragedy is being lived out in squalid camps in and around Jammu. Thousands of Kashmiri Pandits were persuaded to leave the Valley and transported by official trucks to these camps in 1990 by the state governor Jagmohan. A former bureaucrat, he earned notoriety for his strong-hand methods by bulldozing slums during Mrs Indira Gandhi's emergency rule and as her hatchet man in Kashmir where in 1984 he pulled down Farooq Abdullah's ministry with engineered defections to punish him for hobnobbing with hiss political opponents.

Appointed at the BJP's behest, then supporting V P Singh's Janata Dal government at the centre, he believed, with the Pandits out of the way, he would sort out the nascent Kashmiri uprising with a massive brute force. But he couldn't. Instead, the uprising intensified. He had to quit, leaving the poor Pandits out in the cold to

fend for themselves.

For centuries, Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits had lived together in complete communal harmony. And even hard-line Kashmiri resistance leaders have been appealing to them to return, assuring them full security. But a clutch of official agencies and their agents in the community are preventing them with scare stories in order to continue exploiting their miserable plight for deriding the Kashmiri resistance.

For quite a time, the Kashmiris' distress was drawing them a measure of world sympathy. Even Indian rights activists were speaking up against their military's brutalities on the Kashmiri civilians. Independent voices in the Indian media were chronicling the torture methods being tried and perfected on the Kashmiri youth in the army-run Alpha interrogation centres in the occupied territory.

**B**ut all these voices fell silent as soon as our *jihadis* surfaced on the scene. With the free run they had had in the country in the 1990s and with the free flow of their statements and claims in the national press, they gave enough grist to the Indian propaganda mills to misrepresent the Kashmiris' indigenous uprising as Pakistan-sponsored insurgency. With their braggadocio, having more fiction than truth to it, these *jihadis* shaved the Kashmiris' freedom movement of its credibility to their great grief.

But now the world attention seems returning to their doleful plight. A European Union delegation has angered New Delhi by speaking out on the dismal human rights situation in the Valley. Murmurs of concerns on this score have also started being heard from various world capitals. Possibly, all this has sparked the present stridency in Indian rhetoric against Pakistan.

Yet, even as the Kashmiris' political problem has come compellingly alive, their human tragedy still has not. The truth on the ground remains to be established. Who throws grenades in crowded markets that hurt no security man but kill and wound many Kashmiri civilians? Who are the masked men, who barge into homes, molest women and gun down men? To know all this, the occupied territory must open up to international monitors.

So, if "cross-border infiltration" is the common refrain of India's Congress secularists, Hindu nationalists and the communists, "open-up occupied Kashmir to international monitoring" must become the persistent common call of Pakistan and the Kashmiri leadership. Foreign governments now know what the Indians tell them. After their colossal failure in the 9/11 holocaust and Iraq, the myth of western intelligence agencies' omnipresence must be laid to rest.

The Kashmiris' tragedy should not go by default. Now, their travails must end and conditions must obtain for the Pandits to return to their ancestral homes.

**The writer is a freelance columnist  
shahmubarik@hotmail.com**