

Geography In The News™



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KASHMIR ERUPTS AGAIN

As the cycle of violence continues in South Asia, Kashmir continues to be at the heart of many of the security problems. Instead of armed with guns, this time the Kashmiri rebels are young angry men throwing stones. The Kashmiri Stone Pelters, as they call themselves, want freedom from India's strict security presence in the region.

For 50 years, India and Pakistan have been fighting for control of the territory of Kashmir, which lies between the two countries in the northwestern area of the Indian subcontinent. The situation there is extremely complex. Pakistan refers to the region as Kashmir, while India and most of the world know it as Jammu and Kashmir. (For brevity sake, we will refer to it here as Kashmir.)

India and Pakistan have fought three wars over the disputed territory. Historically, the people of the region, who are mostly Muslim, wanted independence from India, followed by an opportunity to join Pakistan. Recently, however, their hostility has been fueled by the desire to oust India's military, which is accused of brutal violence against the Kashmiri Muslims.

In 1947, the British partitioned the Indian subcontinent into two separate states, India and Pakistan. While India was overwhelmingly Hindu, the British formed Pakistan to give the subcontinent's Muslims a homeland. Kashmir became part of India even though it had a Muslim majority. Since then, Pakistan has objected to India's control of the region. In 1971, the two countries

created a Line of Control through Kashmir, partitioning it into two areas of Pakistan and India control. The border itself is a source of conflict.

Although most of the people of Kashmir today are Muslim, both Buddhism and Hinduism have had strong followings throughout the region's history. In fact, Islam did not reach this mountainous region until the 14th century. In spite of the numbers of Islamic conversions, Hindu leaders and large landowners dominated much of the territory, a situation that forms the root of the present cultural conflict.

Kashmir is one of the world's most exotic lands, dotted with spectacular mountains, valleys and lakes. The economic and cultural heart of Kashmir is the Vale of Kashmir, a broad and beautiful valley. Lying between two mountain ranges of the Himalaya, a large natural lake once covered the Vale. The lacustrine (or lake) soils are loamy and easily cultivated, supporting advanced cultures for 2,000 years or more. The Vale along with the Jammu lowland are the only low areas that support large amounts of agriculture in the region.

India, which claims sovereignty over all of Kashmir, occupies roughly two-thirds of the total area, including the Vale of Kashmir. It controls much of the south and east of the region, the area with the majority of the population.

Ninety percent of Kashmir's 86,000 square miles (222,740 sq. km) is rugged, with mountains too steep, too high and too cold for agriculture. Pakistan controls the north and west sections of Kashmir, the more mountainous and sparsely populated areas, containing about 4.5 million

mostly Muslim residents. Much of northern Kashmir consists of the Karakoram Mountain Range, where China also controls a portion of Kashmir, complicating the political issues even further. India-controlled Kashmir contains approximately 9.0 million people, about 77 percent of whom are Muslim.

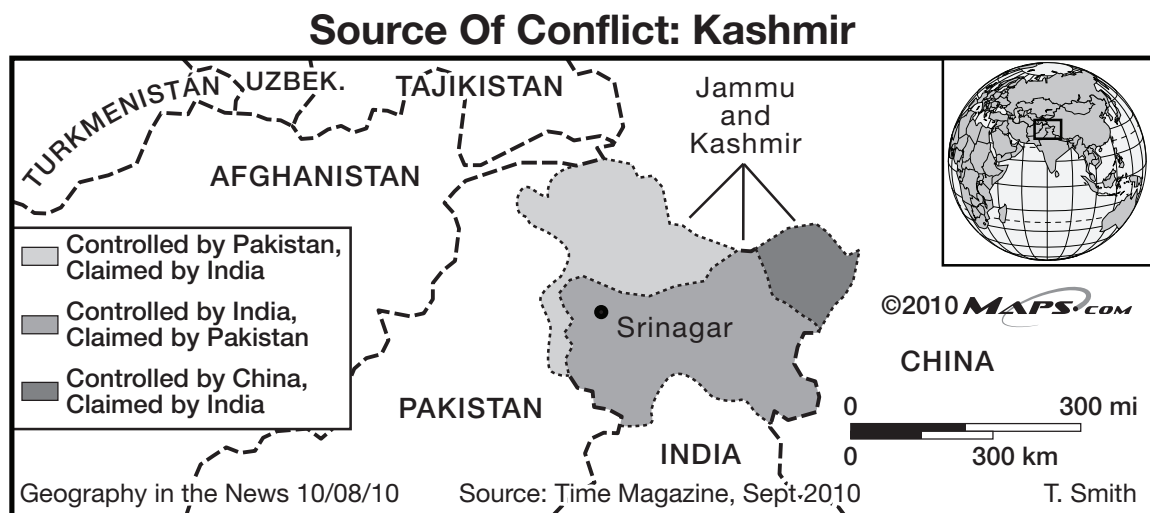
Cultural differences are only one aspect of the conflict over Kashmir. According to *Time* magazine (Sept. 20, 2010), Pakistan's military has long supported extremist groups in Kashmir. By focusing on the continued violence with India in Kashmir, the government has let down its guard against pro-Taliban jihadists hoping to dominate the rest of Pakistan.

India, on the other hand, uses the conflict in Kashmir to justify a strong military presence in the region. India's military presence was supposed to be a source of stability and democratic values, however, Kashmiris see the Indians as occupying their homeland.

Kashmir has perhaps 600,000 unemployed people, many of whom are young male Stone Pelters eager to battle India's military. India keeps 30,000 troops in the region, most around Srinagar, the largest city and has no plans to draw down the number. The fact that Pakistan openly and clandestinely supports the continued uprising against India keeps the conflict boiling. There is no end in sight.

And that is *Geography in the News*™. October 8, 2010. #1062.

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Sources: Thottam, Jyoti, "Kashmir's New Warriors," *Time Magazine*, September 20, 2010, pgs. 63-67; and *GITN* #127, "Kashmir," February 7, 1990.