



Global network nuke sensors went offline after mystery blast

## Hot cargo: US seizes tons of marijuana hidden among peppers



SRINAGAR: A general view of the empty playing area of a closed school in Srinagar yesterday. Some Kashmir schools re-opened yesterday but many pupils stayed away, following weekend clashes after India stripped the region of its autonomy and imposed a lockdown two weeks ago. — AFP

# Kashmir schools deserted amid fear

## Srinagar a city of razor wire and barricades

SRINAGAR: Schools reopened in Indian Kashmir's main city yesterday but most classrooms were empty as parents kept their children home, fearing unrest over the government's decision two weeks ago to revoke the region's autonomy. Some 190 primary schools were set open in Srinagar in a sign of normalcy returning to Muslim majority Jammu and Kashmir where authorities started to ease restrictions on movement last week.

Parents said their children would stay home until cellular networks are restored and they can be in contact with them. "How can we risk the lives of our children?" said Gulzar Ahmad, a father of two children enrolled in a school in the city's Batamalo district where protests have occurred.

"Troops have arrested minor children in the last two weeks and several children were injured in clashes," he said. "Our children are safe inside their homes. If they go to school who can guarantee their safety?" Authorities have previously denied reports of mass arrests. Srinagar's top administrative officer, Shahid Iqbal Choudhary, said on Sunday that adequate security would be provided for schools. "I will take responsibility for any untoward incident," he added.

Protests began after the Aug 5 decision by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to withdraw Kashmir's special status and integrate it fully into India, with equal rights for all Indians to buy property there and compete for government jobs. Critics said the decision alienated many Kashmiris and would add fuel to a 30-year armed revolt in the Himalayan territory that Pakistan also lays claim to. Paramilitary police in riot gear and carrying assault rifles stood behind steel barricades and coils of razor wire in Srinagar's old quarter to deter a repeat of weekend protests.

In dense neighborhoods such as Batamalo, youths set up makeshift barricades to block security forces from entering. Authorities reimposed curbs on movement in parts of Srinagar on Sunday after overnight clashes between residents and police in which dozens were injured, two senior officials and witnesses said. Reuters journalists visited two dozen schools in Srinagar yesterday. Some schools were lightly staffed and classrooms deserted.

Gates at other schools were locked. Only one student showed up at Presentation Convent Higher Secondary School, which has an enrolment of 1,000 pupils, and went home, said a school official. There were no students at the barricaded Burn Hall school in one of the city's high security zones. "How can students come to classes in such a volatile situation? The government is turning these little children into cannon fodder," a teacher said, among a handful of staff who turned up for work.

### Cross border firing

New Delhi's decision on Kashmir has heightened tensions with its neighbor and rival nuclear power, Pakistan, and triggered cross-border exchanges of fire. In the latest incident, two civilians were killed in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir by Indian soldiers firing across the border, Pakistan's foreign ministry said, adding that it had summoned India's deputy commissioner in Islamabad to protest.

"The ceasefire violations by India are a threat to regional peace and security and may lead to a strategic miscalculation," the foreign ministry said. There was no immediate comment from India which has previously accused Pakistan of trying to whip up tensions to draw global attention. Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh said on Sunday there would be no talks with Pakistan until it acted against anti-India militant groups operating from its soil. Any negotiation would focus on the part of Kashmir held by Pakistan, he told a political rally in India.

The scenic mountain region is divided between India, which rules the populous Kashmir Valley and the Hindu-dominated region around Jammu city, Pakistan, which controls a wedge of territory in the west, and China, which holds a thinly populated high-altitude area in the north. More than 50,000 people have died in the revolt that erupted against Indian rule in Kashmir in 1989. India blames Pakistan for giving material support to the militants and helping them cross into its part of the mountainous region. Pakistan denies the allegation and says it only gives moral and diplomatic support to the Kashmiri people in their struggle for self determination. — Reuters



KABUL: A decorated car for the bride and groom is seen outside a wedding hall after a deadly bomb blast in Kabul. — AFP

## Kabul's wedding industry fears for future after attack

KABUL: For years, as violence raged through Afghanistan, lavish weddings offered a rare opportunity for celebration, but now even that is under threat after last weekend's deadly attack on a party venue sent shock waves through one of Kabul's key industries. Over-the-top, glitzy weddings are a big deal for Afghans and for the economy in Kabul, where showy venues the size of aircraft hangars dot the city and employ thousands of workers.

Wedding hall owners and betrothed couples alike are wondering what's next after Saturday's attack, when an Islamic State bomber killed at least 63 guests and staff, and wounded scores more during celebrations at the Shahr-e-Dubai wedding hall in western Kabul. "Wedding halls were one of the few businesses that were still functioning relatively well despite all the problems," said Ghulam Sakhi Sultani, one of the Shahr-e-Dubai's three owners.

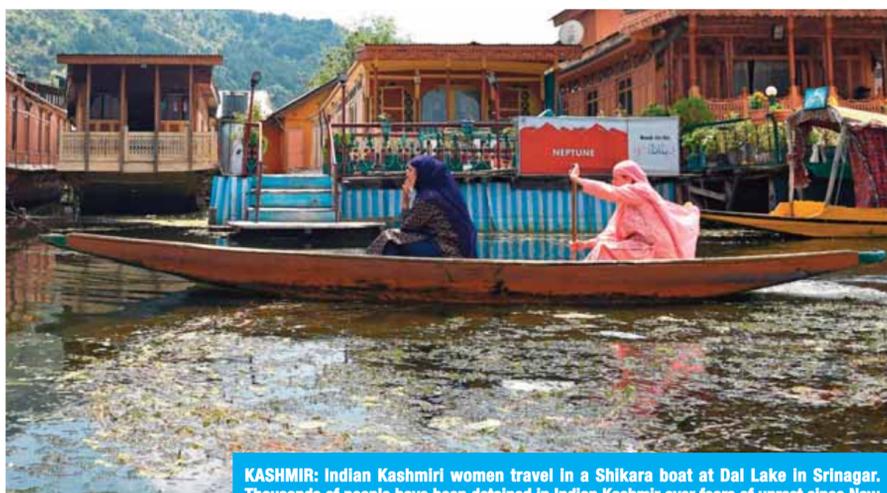
"It will be hard to regain the trust of the people to hold mass weddings inside a wedding hall following this attack." While Afghan weddings have been hit in the past, attacks have typically targeted smaller functions away from the capital. "We fear the terrorists may have chosen mass wedding gatherings as their new targets," said Sultani, who was out of the country when the bombing happened and spoke to AFP by phone late Sunday. Ten of his staff were killed or injured. "Today, most of them did not show up. When we contacted them, they said they fear for their lives."

### No security

Saturday's attack exposes the vulnerability of the wedding halls. In a city where bombs go off almost daily and crime is rampant, Kabul weddings typically don't have any security measures at all, and the halls themselves often have few emergency exits. Couples frequently invite more than 1,000 guests, and gate crashers often wander in off the street. Unless VIPs are present, it is considered insulting to frisk guests, and strangers blend in easily with the crowds of friends and relatives. "We will take extra security measures, but it will be hard to stop a bomber among hundreds of guests coming to a wedding party," Sultani said. Sharif, the manager of another Kabul wedding hall who only gave one name, said his business was already suffering, with no new couples calling to book the venue since the attack.

"We are supposed to provide a joyful and safe environment for people to celebrate the start of their new life together, but following the horrific attack last night, everything will change," he said. "I don't think people will trust us or the government for their security any more." The attack underscores both the inadequacy of Afghanistan's security forces and the scale of the challenge they face in a city that sees frequent attacks by IS, the Taliban, criminals and other groups.

Dawood Hotak, a 26-year-old engaged student, blamed local police and said he now plans to get married at home instead of at a wedding hall. "People should be searched before entering the wedding halls," he said. "If there would have been body searches, I am sure the attack would have been prevented." Fellow student Ahmad Jawed, 24, was also angry at the authorities and lamented the lack of security. "How come a wedding hall does not get attacked when there is VIP party or ceremony?" he said. "The security institutions fail to provide security to ordinary Afghans." — AFP



KASHMIR: Indian Kashmiri women travel in a Shikara boat on Dal Lake in Srinagar. Thousands of people have been detained in Indian Kashmir over fears of unrest since New Delhi stripped the restive region of its autonomy. — AFP