

International

Besieged Kashmir neighborhood in test of wills with India leader

Soura becomes epicenter of resistance to India's Kashmir plan

SRINAGAR: For more than a week, the young men of Soura, a densely populated enclave in Kashmir's main city of Srinagar, have been taking turns to maintain an around-the-clock vigil at the entry points to their neighborhood. Each of the dozen or so entrances have been blocked with makeshift barricades of bricks, corrugated metal sheets, wooden slabs and felled tree trunks. Groups of youths armed with stones congregate behind the biggest obstacles. The aim: to keep Indian security forces, and particularly the paramilitary police, out of the area.

"We have no voice. We are exploding from within," said Ejaz, 25, who like many other residents in Soura interviewed by Reuters gave only one name, saying he feared arrest. "If the world won't listen to us too, then what should we do? Pick up guns?" Soura, home to about 15,000 people, is becoming the epicenter of resistance to Indian government plans to remove the partial autonomy that was enjoyed by Jammu and Kashmir, the country's only Muslim-majority state.

The enclave, which has effectively become a no-go zone for the Indian security forces, is now a barometer of the ability of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-nationalist government to impose its will in Kashmir after its dramatic move on Aug. 5 to tighten its control over the region. The change, the government said, was necessary to integrate Kashmir fully into India, tackle corruption and nepotism, and speed up its development, which Modi says is the key to securing lasting peace and defeating terrorism.

In Soura, it's hard to find anyone who supports Modi's move. Many of the more than two dozen residents interviewed by Reuters over the past week referred to the Indian prime minister as "zaalim", an Urdu word meaning "tyrant". The constitutional change will allow non-residents to buy property in Jammu and Kashmir and apply for jobs in local government. Some Muslims in Kashmir say they fear that India's dominant Hindu population will overrun the lush state at the foot of the

Himalayas, and Kashmiris' identity, culture and religion will be diluted and repressed.

"We feel like we are guarding the LOC here," said Ejaz. The LOC refers to the Line of Control, the highly militarized de facto border between the Indian and Pakistani-controlled parts of Kashmir. For decades, Kashmir has been a source of friction between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan. Both nations claim the region in full and have fought two wars over the territory since 1947.

Residents in Soura say that dozens of people have been injured in clashes with the paramilitary police over the past week. It is unclear how many have been detained. A spokesman for the Jammu and Kashmir government declined to answer questions from Reuters. The Indian government's Home Ministry did not return calls and emails seeking comment.

Daily battles

In Srinagar, the government has banned gatherings of more than four people, set up scores of roadblocks to prevent movement, and detained more than 500 politicians, community leaders and activists. Internet and cell phone services have been out for more than two weeks throughout the city and the rest of the Kashmir valley, making it difficult for opponents of the government's decision to organize protests.

Landline phone service has begun to return to the region but not to Soura, which is best-known for a Muslim shrine and a well-regarded teaching hospital. Residents have found other ways to organize. When they spot security forces trying to enter the area, residents say they rush to a mosque and sound the alarm by playing a devotional song calling for people to "stand against illegal occupation", or by issuing an alert over the loudspeaker.

At intersections in the warren of narrow lanes that make up Soura, a largely lower middle class area with a lake and marshy wetlands to its west, there are piles of bricks and stones for use against Indian troops. At one



SINDH: Supporters of the Tehreek-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) party shout slogans during an anti-Indian protest rally in Karachi yesterday as they condemn India stripping the disputed Kashmir region of its special autonomy and imposing a lockdown two weeks ago. — AFP

barricade, concertina wire had been strung across the road. The young men patrolling the barrier said the wire had been stolen from Indian security forces.

A protest on Aug. 9, when people took to the streets after Friday prayers, marked Soura as the focal point of resistance to the Indian government's decision. As residents from surrounding neighborhoods joined the demonstration, the crowd swelled to at least 10,000, according to local police sources. More than a dozen residents told Reuters that around 150 to 200 security personnel in riot gear attempted to enter Soura after the protests, resulting in clashes with residents that went on late into the night, as police fired tear gas and metal pellets.

The Indian government initially denied there had been a

protest, and said there had been no gathering in Soura involving more than 20 people. It later said there had been a demonstration of 1,000 to 1,500 people, after TV footage of the crowd was broadcast by the BBC and Al Jazeera. Since then, Soura has been the scene of smaller demonstrations and daily running battles with the security forces, according to people living in the neighborhood.

The security forces have made several attempts to enter Soura, according to residents, with the apparent goal of sealing off a large area of open ground next to the Jinab Sahib shrine that has become an assembly point for protesters. "Every day they are trying to attack us here, but we are fighting back," said Owais, in his early twenties. "We feel like we are trapped." — Reuters

'I'm here 24/7': Rohingya youths share their stories on social media

KUTUPALONG: When Mohammad Rafiq spotted two Rohingya refugee girls dusting their faces with circles of traditional thanaka powder under the warm morning light, he quickly took out his smartphone to capture the moment. The 19-year-old budding photographer, who fled to Bangladesh in August 2017 after a military crackdown in Myanmar, uses his mobile phone to record the daily lives of nearly one million stateless Rohingyas in a vast camp in southern Bangladesh.

"I loved the photo instantly as it reflects our culture and the innocence of the little girls who barely want to remember the crisis we are facing," Rafiq said. Rafiq is among some 30 Rohingya youths selected by the World Food Program for its "Storytellers" project. For two weeks, they are taught smartphone photo and video-shooting techniques—such as understanding light, exposure and angles—as well as writing skills.

The refugees then share their stories directly with the public through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, with audiences around the world posting comments and asking questions. "The idea behind it is to be able to hand back the narrative to the people that we are already assisting," WFP spokeswoman Gemma Snowden said. The Storytellers Page on Facebook has more than 30,000 followers and includes similar schemes rolled out in Chad and Uganda.

All the Rohingya posters have a similar goal—to share with the outside world the raw, emotional ups and downs they face living in the world's largest refugee camp. Minara, who was four months' pregnant when she fled Myanmar, shares videos of how refugees are given ropes to tie their makeshift tarpaulin roofs to bamboo poles so they are not blown away by strong winds. Another post, by Hafsa Aktar, is a heartrending letter to her father who was left behind, in which she writes of the difficult conditions in the camp and her deep longing to return to her homeland.

Life through the lens

Being able to take photos again has put a spring in the steps of Rafiq, who wanted to continue his schooling after the 10th grade in Myanmar but was blocked by authorities. When he was 15, Rafiq's father



KUTUPALONG: Rohingya youth Mohammad Rafiq (2nd right, in white) uses his mobile phone to take photos of children at the Kutupalong refugee camp. — AFP

bought him his first-ever smartphone as a present. Thrilled with the device, he explored his town in Myanmar's northern Rakhine state, taking photos of everything he loved.

But Rafiq's life was turned upside down in 2017 when the brutal army campaign drove some 740,000 Rohingya Muslims across the border to Cox's Bazar, where another 200,000 refugees were already living in squalid camps. During the arduous journey to neighboring Bangladesh to escape the violence, the teenager lost his favorite possession—his smartphone.

"I arrived in Bangladesh with my mother and three younger siblings after 10 days of harrowing walks through the hills," Rafiq recalled as he sat in a shanty inside the camp. "I wish I could have captured the moments of anguish we had to suffer on our way out of Myanmar." Now Rafiq is becoming a star on Facebook

parents keeping their children at home. With mobile phone networks still down and only some landlines in operation, families don't want to be separated from their offspring without being able to check on them. One parent fretting about his children's studies is local businessman Showkat Shafi, who has decided not to send his two daughters, aged eight and 13, back to school until tensions ease.

There have been regular bouts of demonstrations in some parts of Kashmir despite the lockdown, with security personnel firing tear gas and pellet guns. "It has become really difficult to live like this," Showkat, whose dyeing factory has been shut amid the lockdown, told AFP in the residential district of Nowshera. "I don't know how much longer this will continue. What else can we do now but ask them (children) to not leave their home and just study or keep themselves busy."

'Young live in fear'

For Saleem, the outbreaks of violence also trigger another fear—that he'll be mistaken as a protester and locked up by the authorities amid a sweeping crackdown. His home is next to Srinagar's main mosque Jama Masjid, where protests regularly break out. While authorities have kept the mosque shut since the start of August, they also view this old part of the city as a hotbed of dissent.

At least 4,000 people have been detained over the past two weeks under the Public Safety Act (PSA), which allows imprisonment for up to two years without charge or trial, government sources said. Meanwhile the family's food rations are almost depleted and Saleem, a door-to-door women's clothing salesman who lives almost hand-to-

through his photos. In one post that has attracted some 180,000 views, Rafiq captures a woman meditating during the month of Ramadan to show how the Muslim minority are now free to practice their religion even as they grapple with the hardships in the cramped shelters.

"International media is covering the stories in the camps but they are not here 24/7 but I am," he said, adding that his stories were more authentic. "People learn from my stories that we are seeking justice and want to return home." On some days, Rafiq walks to a vantage point in the camps where he can see the hills of Myanmar shrouded by clouds in the distance, and thinks of home. "I see flashbacks of how my friends and I used to roam around the place. I feel very sad," he said, adding that he hopes to return one day and be a photojournalist. "That will be the fulfillment of my dream." — AFP

Philippines president warns of 'unfriendly' greeting for warships

MANILA: President Rodrigo Duterte warned yesterday foreign ships faced "unfriendly" treatment if they ventured into Philippines' territorial waters without permission, in a swipe at China's deployment of warships a few miles off the coast. The warning comes as Duterte faces critics at home who accuse him of being passive over Chinese provocations in exchange for business ties with Beijing, though promised investments have been slow in coming.

Duterte's frustration over multiple sightings this year of Chinese warships moving within the country's 12-mile territorial sea, at various locations in the archipelago, was relayed yesterday by his spokesman Salvador Panelo.

"All foreign vessels passing our territorial waters must notify and get clearance from the proper government authority well in advance of the actual passage," Panelo said in a statement, quoting Duterte. "Either we get a compliance in a friendly manner or we enforce it in an unfriendly manner," he added. Panelo did not refer to China by name, nor elaborate on what that enforcement might entail.

Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana told reporters an unfriendly response could involve escorting the unwelcome vessel out of the area. "There are so many things that we can do to be unfriendly," he said. Opinion surveys consistently give Duterte a level of domestic approval never seen at this point in a presidency. The same polls show growing disdain for China over its conduct in the South China Sea and concerns among some Filipinos over an influx of Chinese online gaming workers under Duterte. — Reuters

Indian preacher apologizes to Malaysians

KUALA LUMPUR: A controversial Indian Islamic preacher apologized yesterday for making comments about race in multi-ethnic Malaysia which sparked calls for his expulsion, a day after being questioned by police. Zakir Naik, a radical television preacher who has called the 9/11 attacks an "inside job", left India in 2016 and moved to largely Muslim Malaysia, where he was granted permanent residency.

He is wanted in India for inciting extremism and money laundering, and New Delhi last year reportedly asked Malaysia to extradite him—a request that was rejected. Calls have escalated for Naik to be kicked out after he said Hindus in Malaysia have "100 times" more rights than India's Muslim minority, and suggested Chinese Malaysians should be expelled before he was.

He was questioned by police for 10 hours Monday on suspicion of committing an intentional insult aimed at provoking a breach of the peace. On Tuesday, Naik said in a statement his detractors had taken his remarks out of context and added "strange fabrications". But he went on: "It was never my intention to upset any individual or community. It is against the basic tenets of Islam, and I would like to convey my heartfelt apologies for this misunderstanding."

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has said Naik crossed the line and several cabinet ministers have called for him to be kicked out, while police have banned him from giving public talks anywhere in Malaysia, state news agency Bernama reported. The government has in the past appeared reluctant to move against Naik for fear it could upset some Muslims and provide ammunition to political opponents.

About 60 percent of Malaysia's 32 million inhabitants are Muslim and the country is also home to substantial ethnic Indian and Chinese communities. — AFP

No phones, no friends: Cut-off Kashmir kids despair in lockdown

SRINAGAR: In a tiny building in a cramped narrow lane in Kashmir's main city of Srinagar, Mohammad Saleem and his family feel cut off from the world and trapped in their home as an Indian military lockdown enters its third week. New Delhi imposed the strict movement and communications clampdown hours before stripping the restive Himalayan region of its autonomy on August 5, in a bid to quell any unrest triggered by the controversial move. The security measures have exacted a toll on the valley's children, who are going stir-crazy from the isolation and lack of communication with friends.

"I can't study, connect with any of my friends and can't even go out because of all these restrictions," Saleem's 13-year-old son Shayan said. "I really miss going to school. We used to play a lot there. We have been sitting at one place now, what do we do here?" Father-of-three Saleem said his younger daughter moved to live with her grandmother as she was "feeling caged", pointing to a small hall in the first floor of his home where the family have spent most of their time.

Indian authorities re-opened schools in some parts of Kashmir on Monday, but classrooms were largely empty with



SRINAGAR: Men on scooters drive past a member of the Indian security forces on a street in the Lal Chowk area of Srinagar yesterday. — AFP

mouth, hopes to feed his family by borrowing money. His daughter Iram is in her first year of college and has dreams of becoming a teacher.

With no sign from Indian authorities on when they will lift the curfew and restore communications services, despair rather than hope now fills her thoughts. "I can't study because the internet is down... I can't go anywhere. Where do I go? What do I do now?" Iram said: "Everyone's future is getting destroyed. The young here live in fear. The moment you go out you have stone pelting, tear gas, curfew... there is everything, I feel that there isn't as much injustice anywhere in the world than there is for the children in Kashmir." — AFP