

## International

# India orders probe into shooting of two 'civilians' in Kashmir

**JAMMU:** Authorities in Indian-administered Kashmir ordered a probe yesterday into the killing of two men during a security operation, after police violently broke up a protest demanding the bodies be returned to their families.

Police said the men died in "crossfire" on Monday during a shootout inside a commercial complex in Srinagar, the disputed region's main city. Their families said they were civilians and accused security forces of murdering the pair in "cold blood", denying police claims that the pair were associated with militants.

Manoj Sinha, a New Delhi appointee serving as Indian Kashmir's top administrator, said the government would take "suitable action" as soon as a report into Monday's incident was completed. The deaths of Mohammad Altaf Bhat and Mudasir Ahmed Gul sparked outrage in the territory, where around three dozen civilians have been killed this year.

Bhat owned the building where Monday's incident took place, while Gul was a tenant in the complex running a real estate business. Two suspected militants also died in the encounter. Police raided a candlelight vigil in Srinagar staged by family members demanding the pair's bodies be returned for a proper Islamic burial.

The sit-in protest had been underway since Wednesday morning, despite biting winter cold,

but electricity was cut in the area around midnight and several people were bundled into an armoured vehicle. "They harassed and beat us up and took us into a police station," Abdul Maheed, Bhat's brother, told AFP.

"All I am saying is that please return my innocent brother's body so we can give him a decent burial." Those detained were later sent home.

### 'Never punished'

After Bhat and Gul were killed, they were hurriedly buried in the middle of the night by police in a remote graveyard without their families present. Since last year police in Kashmir have refused families access to the bodies of slain militants or their "associates", saying it helps stop "glorification" of anti-India rebels, whose funerals were usually attended by thousands of people.

Pervez Imroz, a prominent human rights lawyer who has monitored violence in the restive territory for over three decades, said the probe was meant to "deflate public anger". "We have seen numerous executive probes ordered here in the past, but perpetrators were never punished despite many indictments," Imroz told AFP.

A faction of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference separatist group called on people in Kashmir to shutter their shops and businesses on



**SRINAGAR:** Former chief minister Omar Abdullah sits during a protest to demand justice for the recent killings of two civilians who died during a security operation by government forces, in Srinagar yesterday. — AFP

Friday to protest the deaths. Kashmir has been divided between India and Pakistan since their independence in 1947.

The South Asian arch-rivals separately administer parts of the Himalayan region and each claim the territory in full. Tens of thousands of

people, mostly civilians, have been killed since an armed rebellion against Indian rule erupted more than three decades ago.

Tensions have festered since 2019 when New Delhi cancelled the region's partial autonomy and brought it under direct rule. — AFP

## Clearing Afghan's landmines one careful step at a time

**NAD-E-ALI, Afghanistan:** Weeks after the Taliban took over Afghanistan, families who fled the fighting in one southern village returned home to find something strange: The cricket ground had been circled in rocks painted red and white. White, it turned out, meant it was safe for children to play. But red signalled buried landmines and other ordnance — the explosive remnants of war that have killed or maimed tens of thousands of Afghans over the past four decades.

The village of Nad-e-Ali in Helmand province became a front line in the final days of the war between the Taliban and Western-backed government forces in Kabul. It was besieged for two months until the Islamists took control of the country in mid-August.

When its residents returned in September they found the village school riddled with gunfire, its roof blackened by smoke, and the children's swings reduced to just a metal frame. They also found that the area had been "totally mined" in the fighting, according to Juma Khan, the local coordinator for the HALO Trust, the main mine-clearing NGO operating in Afghanistan.

Newly laid mines and other booby traps were buried beneath doors of buildings and beside



**NAD-E-ALI, Afghanistan:** This picture taken on November 9, 2021 shows a teacher from the HALO (Hazardous Area Life-Support Organization) Trust talking about mine risks in Nad-e-Ali village in Helmand province. — AFP

windows. "The rooms inside had mines and there were mines on the main street," Khan told AFP during a visit to Nad-e-Ali this month.

About 41,000 Afghan civilians have been killed or wounded by landmines and unexploded ordnance since 1988, according to the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS). More than two-thirds of the victims were children, many of whom spotted the deadly devices while playing and picked them up.

The HALO (Hazardous Area Life-Support

Organization) Trust was founded in 1988 specifically to tackle ordnance left behind during the Soviet occupation of the country. The country was so badly contaminated, however, that the clearance work never stopped — even after an international treaty banning the use of landmines was signed in 1997, with Afghanistan ratifying the convention in 2002.

More than 30 years later, in the battles leading up to the Taliban's return to power, mines and improvised explosive devices were again

laid and left behind — this time by both the Islamists and their now ousted adversaries.

### 'Screaming and crying'

HALO — one of the favourite charities of Princess Diana — struck an agreement with the new Taliban authorities in September to have its more than 2,500 Afghan employees return to work. In Nad-e-Ali, Taliban fighters are now guiding HALO's deminers to find the deadly traps they themselves set up.

Because they live in the village and do not want to be blamed for civilian deaths, Taliban fighters "used to take them out with their own hands, but we stopped them to avoid any further detonations", said Khan. But even as demining efforts persist, explosions have already caused casualties among villagers.

Two months ago the wife of a village teacher lost both her legs when an explosive device detonated the moment she opened the door of her house. "This incident was very painful. I saw it happen with my own eyes," said the teacher, Bismillah. "I saw my children screaming and crying... I'm alone and the stress is too much, too much." Since then, the village and its school have been classified as a "high priority" demining zone.

It was HALO that set up the red and white rocks to mark out safe corridors for their 10 teams of eight deminers as they carefully inspect the ground using metal detectors. "When it detects metal, battery or anything it rings an alarm. Then we mark the area, and start to dig very carefully," said supervisor Bahramudin Ahmadi. — AFP