

India, Pakistan edge closer to war

India and Pakistan appear headed for a direct military clash over fabled Kashmir, the romantic vale of lakes and towering mountains where hundreds have died since January in steadily mounting violence and rebellion.

Armor and troops are taking up forward positions in what was formerly the venue of lovers and poets.

The two old foes have already fought three major wars, as well as a long series of border battles, over the highly strategic mountain state that lies at the convergence of India, Pakistan, China and the USSR.

India, one of the world's leading military powers, is concentrating half of its 1.2 million-man army and most of its armor around Kashmir, in neighboring Punjab and further south in Rajasthan, directly opposite Pakistan's narrow, vulnerable waist. Pakistan's smaller, but more martial 450,000-man army is also on a war footing.

In recent weeks India's new prime minister, V.P. Singh, stated that "India is psychologically prepared for an armed conflict with Pakistan." Even more menacing, the leader of the right-wing Hindu BJP party, the key partner in Singh's coalition government, warned that Pakistan would "cease to exist" if it dared go to war with India. The BJP and other Hindu chauvinists want to see Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka reunited into a Greater India.

At the heart of this dangerous situation is the Moslem uprising, or intifada, in Kashmir. When the British divided up their imperial raj into India and Pakistan in 1947, the state of Kashmir was supposed to have remained independent until its inhabitants decided which nation to join.

The Hindu prince's family that ran Kashmir immediately elected to unite with India and called in Indian

Eric IV ARGOLIS



troops. After heavy fighting with Pakistani irregulars, India ended up with two-thirds of Kashmir and Pakistan with the remainder. Since then, Kashmir's Moslem majority has chafed under inept and corrupt rule by India and its local Moslem and Hindu allied parties.

By appending the Hindu region of Jammu and Buddhist Ladakh to Kashmir, India only worsened an already bad problem. In recent months, thousands of Hindus have fled the rising violence in Kashmir. Pakistan has long demanded that India agree to allow Kashmiris to vote in a UN-supervised plebiscite to determine if they want to stay in India or join Pakistan. The Indians, not surprisingly, bitterly oppose the idea, knowing full well that most Kashmiris would vote to join Moslem Pakistan.

Kashmir is of vital strategic importance to India — as well as to Pakistan. In addition, the secession of Kashmir might trigger a similar process among the rebellious Sikhs in Punjab, in Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram or even in south India. Complicating the problem, some militant Moslem separatists are calling for an independent Kashmiri state while Hindu militants in India are demanding the rebellion be crushed by maximum force. On top of all this, both Pakistan and India are being

ruled by weak governments which are being pushed to war by extremists.

Pakistan is being ineptly led by Benazir Bhutto and her mother, who are clinging to power by their fingernails, fearful the army will throw them out and charge them with complicity in the murder of the late president, Zia ul-Haq.

In India, V.P. Singh is being pushed to war by his BJP coalition partner and the opposition Congress party. Many Indians increasingly believe the only way to end the rebellion in Kashmir — and in Punjab, for that matter — is by a heavy show of force, or even a direct invasion of Pakistan.

Heavily outnumbered and outgunned, Pakistan could very well face a severe defeat — as it did in the calamitous 1971 war when India tore away East Pakistan and made it into Bangladesh.

Pakistan's only close regional ally, China, appears to have indicated it does not want to get involved over Kashmir. India's closest ally, the USSR, also says it wants to stay out of this imbroglio, but continues to supply New Delhi with vast amounts of hi-tech weapons. More important, India almost certainly has nuclear arms. A squadron of nuclear-armed Jaguar strike aircraft is reportedly operational close to the Pakistani border. India may have a small number of nuclear-armed missiles targeted at Pakistan.

The Pakistanis may also have a few nuclear devices, though this is still uncertain. Nuclear weapons would be Pakistan's ultimate insurance policy to prevent being gobbled up by mighty India.

Given the deep hatreds between the two peoples and religions, use of nuclear or chemical weapons in a war cannot be discounted. Unless cooler heads prevail, the vale of lovers could soon turn into a valley of death.