

Tempers boil in Kashmir

MIAMI — Kashmir, the north Indian state nestled in the Himalayas, conjures for most people a romantic image of mountain-girded lakes and quaint houseboats. An image that is being shattered. Kashmir is fast emerging as India's newest hot spot and a major threat to peace in West Asia.

The state of Jammu and Kashmir — as it is properly known — has been a sharp bone of contention between India and Pakistan since the two nations were created by Britain in 1947. Kashmir is the only Indian state with a Moslem majority. As soon as the British pulled their troops out, Indian and Pakistani forces fought violent battles for its possession. A ceasefire left Kashmir divided, with the largest portion going to India, but the two bad neighbors have fought or skirmished repeatedly over the contested state.

In recent years, unrest has been growing among the Moslems of Indian Kashmir, many of whom want either independence from India or outright union with Moslem Pakistan. Inept and sometimes brutal misrule by the Congress party of India — which was just ousted in national elections — only made matters worse. India's new government, headed by V.P. Singh, who is widely seen as an honest reformer, sought as its first priority to resolve this problem. Singh named a Kashmiri Moslem as federal home minister — the man in charge of India's internal security. This was the first time a Moslem had been named to this sensitive position. Indian Moslems were delighted.

A small band of Moslem extremists, known as the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, did not agree. Last Friday, they kidnapped the home minister's 23-year-old daughter who lived in Kashmir and demanded the release of five of their comrades held by the security police. This stupid and shameful act was condemned by Moslems across India. Even though the daughter has just been released and the prisoners freed, the kidnapping was a harbinger of more violence to come. In fact, this week a large bomb was exploded in the capital of Kashmir, Srinagar, near the headquarters of RAW, India's intelligence agency.

India is full of regional tantrums and secessionist movements. What makes events in Kashmir so dangerous? The fact that the bulk of the large,

**ERIC
MARGOLIS**



powerful armies of India and Pakistan are deployed there and further south from the mountains down into Rajasthan and Central Pakistan — one of the world's largest concentrations of troops. Both armies are dug in close to one another the length of the long border and frequently trade shots in a trigger-happy truce.

India now faces a dangerous and secessionist uprising in Kashmir just as the new government is hoping to finally end the long, bloody separatist struggle with the Sikhs of Punjab. It is most unfortunate that Singh's government has to face this daunting problem so early in its tenure when energies should be devoted to cleaning up the corruption and inefficiency that are the legacy of the long-ruling Congress party.

If unrest worsens among Kashmir's Moslems — and I think it will — tensions between Pakistan and India will grow. Considering that the two nations came very close to war two years ago, it's not hard to imagine a revolt in Kashmir turning into either a limited or even general war.

Emotions on both sides run very high over Kashmir. India is determined to protect this very strategic area, which also contains Hindus in Jammu and Buddhists in Ladakh. This latter region is particularly sensitive because it borders Tibet and is a key Indian military bastion for the defence of the Himalayas against any attack by China. For Pakistan, Kashmir's Moslems are persecuted brothers who need to be liberated from Hindu oppression. In other words, both sides have ample excuses for going to war over Kashmir and, equally important, the means to do so.

Especially worrying is the fact both India and Pakistan either have nuclear weapons or are only a screwdriver turn away from obtaining them.

Two decades ago, when Pakistan had just lost a war with India, it agreed at gunpoint not to raise the issue of divided Kashmir in the future. Now, however, it's clear Pakistan wants to do so either at the UN or directly with New Delhi. Pakistan seeks a UN referendum to ask Kashmiris if they want to stay with India or join Pakistan. This idea is adamantly opposed by India which knows which way the Moslem majority would vote.

Now that Kashmir is approaching a slow boil, this dispute can no longer be downplayed or sidelined by India and Pakistan — as it has been in recent years. Kashmiri separatists know this and are trying to provoke the two sides into fighting, figuring a small or medium-sized war will help their case. More likely would be a big war, with the possible intervention of neighboring China on Pakistan's side.

Unless something is done soon to quiet down Kashmir, it may become the world's newest exotic trouble spot. Car bombs and ambushes could quickly turn the romantic vale of Kashmir, described by tourist brochures as "a paradise on earth," into a valley of tears.

Berry's World



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Jim Berry

"Where the heck have you been, Van Winkle?
NOBODY does three-martini lunches
anymore!"