

## CLIMATE OF FEAR

### **Elections: Intimidation by Indian troops and their 'renegades' are forcing many to cast their votes**

JOHN HUNT  
In Srinagar

The burial of 16 year old Mohammed Younis was as tragic as his death. As the crowd carried his body to the "Martyrs' Graveyard" in the old city of Srinagar, three gunmen blocked their exit from a narrow alleyway and killed two teenage brothers. These deaths and the street battles which accompanied them on Saturday reflect the bitterness and fear which surround the first elections to be held in the Valley of Kashmir since 1989.

Most Kashmiris say they are opposed to the polling and will vote only under the pressure of the several hundred thousand Indian army and paramilitary forces which are encamped in the valley, India says this military might is needed to defend its borders and protect the valley from the terrorism of Pakistani-sponsored militant groups.

The former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was divided and occupied by India and Pakistan when the British withdrew in 1947. The two countries have since warred twice over Kashmir. Many Kashmiris say they have been denied the right to self-determination and most favor independence.

Last Thursday, I observed the polling in the towns of Baramulla and Sopore and seven villages. Everywhere people told the same story. They said soldiers had visited their homes threatening "dire consequences" if they did not get their hands stamped with indelible ink by a polling officer.

A pattern emerged in the villages: when our taxi arrived, the soldiers would try to become inconspicuous and the voting queues dissolved as people rushed to our car shouting slogans such as *Azadi*, meaning freedom. One man complained about the available candidates. "They are illiterates and are not our choice".

In the village of Seelu, people said that the soldiers were standing beside the booths to check that voters did not spoil their ballot papers. In Sopore, I watched a soldier check a man's hand as he left the polling station. In

Baramulla, the army broke up a demonstration by thousands protesting against intimidation.

Srinagar is now bracing itself for the second round of voting on Thursday. People here say they are less likely to succumb to army pressure than isolated villagers. But their fear of the army is probably exceeded by a hatred for the “renegades”, whom many blame for Saturday’s deaths. These are former separatist militants who have changed sides after being captured or surrendering to the military. Now they operate in Kashmiri dress under Indian direction and protection, helping to track down former comrades and – it is alleged – indulging in criminality.

Mohammed Younis died when local people took to the streets of the old city to protest at an attempt by a car load of “renegades” to rob and abduct a young couple. Locals said the militants, from Ikhwanul Muslimoon, one of a number of pro-India groups, opened fire on the crowds before fleeing to the fortified house where they shelter in the shadow of a border security force bunker. For about two hours, they were besieged by a stone-throwing crowd.

The army took no action when the gunmen again fired indiscriminately. Several people were injured in their homes, including Obadeh Ruha, 22, who had a narrow escape when a bullet grazed her forehead. “This is a miracle for us – these are state-sponsored terrorists”, declared her father.

The official line is that the casualties were caused by “crossfiring between rival militant groups”. But I myself witnessed a gunman fire twice at a group of unarmed youths who were throwing stones. Two soldiers stood beside him.

There are an estimated 2,000 “renegades” operating in Kashmir belonging to the Ikhwanul Muslimoon and other outfits. While the Indian authorities have dealt the separatist militants a severe blow, they have also lost yet another battle in the war to win hearts and minds. Disillusionment has been growing in the past two years or so because of the machinations of Pakistani intelligence agencies and the involvement of some militants in robbery, extortion and rape. Now many believe that the criminal elements have joined the renegades and that they are being given a free hand by the authorities.

“Without the protection of the security forces, they would not survive for one day”, one man told me. When a grenade bounced off a border security force bunker in the city yesterday, injuring many passers by, a shopkeeper expressed the views of many. “No soldier has been hurt. How do we know who was responsible? It could be the work of the renegades”, he said.

A small event in Lal Chowk yesterday symbolized both the farcical aspects of this election and the degree to which the Indian army has succeeded in crushing militancy. A rally was staged by the Awami party, the political wing of Ikhwanul Muslimoon. Their candidate, Javed Shah – a former pro-Pakistan militant – arrived in a military convoy and remained in his car as a spokesman harangued a group of some 50 people who were sitting in the road.

It transpired that they had been bused in from Pampore, some ten miles away. When I asked one man if he had come voluntarily; he smiled, shrugged and looked away as a security guard approached. A year ago the army would probably not have dared stage such an event in the city centre. It was more a display of power than an election rally.

The Indian government plans to follow quickly these elections with voting for a Jammu and Kashmir state assembly. They want to end six years of government rule and “normalize” the situation by installing a local administration with a measure of popular support. But despite the plethora of candidates on offer on Thursday, most Kashmiris probably support the all party Hurriat Conference, which is boycotting the polls and calls for tripartite talks between India, Pakistan and Kashmiri representatives. Hurriat’s strike call has been largely observed for most of the past week. The authorities had been forced to bus in thousands of election officials from India.

Yesterday I was approached by a Kashmiri policeman who asked me what I thought of the elections so far. He seemed relieved by my reply. “Good”, he said. “Nobody listens to us, but you people must tell the truth to the outside world”.