

International

Kashmir hotels empty or shut as tourist restrictions lifted

Internet and mobile phones remain cut off in most areas

SRINAGAR: India lifted yesterday restrictions on tourists visiting Kashmir, but for hotels around the picturesque lake in Srinagar two months into a lockdown it was still far from business as usual. Authorities in early August had told holidaymakers to leave “immediately” over “terror threats” to a major Hindu pilgrimage, sending thousands scrambling for places on planes and buses.

A few days later on August 5 New Delhi scrapped Indian-administered Kashmir of its semi-autonomous status, sent in tens of thousands of extra troops and imposed a lockdown. More than two months later the internet and mobile phones remain cut off in most areas and fixed-line phone lines are unreliable, crippling many businesses - including in tourism. “Lifting the restrictions on tourists coming will not help until communications are restored,” Vishal Sharma, general manager of the five-star Taj Vivanta hotel said.

“We haven’t had a single direct call (on the phone) for a booking,” he said, all 83 rooms at the hotel empty. “The last two months were the worst ever.” It was a similar story at the luxury Lalit Grand Palace where a senior member of staff, preferring to stay anonymous, said occupancy in the 113 rooms was “very low”. Most other hotels around the lake were shuttered, as were travel agents, while Srinagar’s famous houseboats, usually full at this time of the year, looked mostly empty.

‘Terrorists’

Kashmir has been split between India and Pakistan since 1947 and has been the spark of two wars and numerous skirmishes since, most



SRINAGAR: A local man rows a boat near houseboats hotels in Dal Lake in Srinagar yesterday. The local government of Jammu and Kashmir announced the end of restrictions for tourist visiting the state following the security advisory issued before the scrapping by the Indian government of Article 370 that granted a special status to Jammu and Kashmir. — AFP

recently in February with tit-for-tat air strikes. India says that most people in its part of Kashmir support its August 5 move, and that militants backed by Pakistan are covering businesses into not cooperating. It says that communications remain snapped to prevent these “terrorists” organizing attacks.

Authorities say they have killed several militants in gun battles and intercepted weapons. Authorities yesterday also released three low-ranking politicians who along with hundreds of other local lawmakers, activists and others have been detained since August 5. Those still

in detention include three former Kashmir chief ministers: Farooq Abdullah, Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti. Farooq Abdullah, 81, was formerly arrested in mid-September under a law allowing him to be held for up to two years without charge that has been widely used, and criticized, in Kashmir.

More than 250 people have been sent to jails outside Jammu and Kashmir, the Press Trust of India news agency reported. UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet said last month she was “deeply concerned” while Washington has called for a “rapid” lifting of restrictions. The

issue has clouded preparations for a two-day “informal summit” between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping beginning in India today.

India’s August move to split Jammu and Kashmir state in two irked China because it will make the Ladakh region - claimed in part by Beijing - of the state a separate administrative territory. China has given diplomatic backing to Pakistan, while part of its Belt and Road infrastructure initiative passes through Pakistan-administered Kashmir, which is claimed by India.— AFP

Minister stabbed by IS-linked pair

JAKARTA: Two members of an IS-linked terror network stabbed Indonesia’s chief security minister Wiranto yesterday, the intelligence head said, as the powerful politician underwent emergency surgery for his wounds. Television images showed security officers wrestling a man and woman to the ground in Pandeglang on Java island after the attack on Wiranto, who goes by one name, as he was exiting a vehicle.

The suspects were identified as 31-year-old Syahril Alamsyah and Fitri Andriana, 21 - a married couple, according to local media. They were members of Jamaah Ansharut

Daulah (JAD), an extremist group responsible for deadly suicide bombings at churches in Indonesia’s second-biggest city Surabaya last year, State Intelligence Agency chief Budi Gunawan told reporters in Jakarta.

JAD is among dozens of radical groups that have pledged loyalty to the Islamic State group in Indonesia, which has long struggled with Islamist militancy. Wiranto, 72 - who police have said was one of several targets in an earlier failed assassination plot - was rushed by helicopter to the capital where he was treated for two knife wounds in his stomach. “He is currently in surgery and I ask that all Indonesians pray that he gets well soon,” said President Joko Widodo.

“And I ask for everyone’s help in fighting radicalism and terrorism because we can only do it together,” he added. The assassination attempt comes just over a week before Widodo kicks off a second term as leader of the Southeast Asian archipelago of some 260 million people, the world’s biggest

Muslim majority nation. Three others - a local police chief and two aides - also suffered knife wounds in yesterday’s attack but authorities said they had non-life-threatening injuries.

‘Fought the police’

An eyewitness told an AFP reporter that the female attacker was dressed in a body-and-face-covering niqab. “When the car stopped, there were people circling around, protecting him,” he said. “But a man got into the circle and stabbed Wiranto. The woman also tried to stab him. He was arrested and the woman fought the police.” Last year, JAD staged a wave of suicide bombings by families - including young children - at churches in Surabaya, killing a dozen congregants. Many past attacks by Indonesian militants have been against police and other state symbols. Authorities routinely arrest suspected IS-loyal militants that they claim were planning bomb and other attacks. “JAD

members are targeting what they call Ansharut Thagut (tyranny) and that includes senior government officials,” said Muhammad Syauqillah, program director of the University of Indonesia’s Terrorism Study Center. Wiranto, the retired chief of the armed forces and a failed presidential candidate, was appointed to his post in 2016 and oversees several departments, including the foreign affairs and defence ministries.

He has faced controversy over alleged human rights violations and allegations of crimes against humanity linked to Indonesia’s brutal occupation of East Timor. In May, police said Wiranto and three other top officials were targeted in a failed assassination plot linked to deadly riots in Jakarta after Widodo’s re-election victory. A group of six people - arrested before they could carry out the killings - planned to murder the officials and an election pollster in a bid to plunge the country into chaos, police said at the time.— AFP