

International

Anger, impatience mount in Pakistan's Kashmir; Khan makes diplomatic push

Regional tensions swell since India strips its portion of autonomy

MUZZAFFARABAD: As Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan delivers another appeal to the world to address the situation in Kashmir, he faces the risk that rising anger in his country's portion of the disputed region could spiral into a confrontation with India. Some people in Pakistan's portion of Kashmir said thousands of people were preparing to storm the line of control (LOC) - a ceasefire line agreed with India that is one of the most militarized frontiers in the world. Reuters could not independently verify the claims.

But regional tensions have swelled since India stripped its portion of Kashmir of autonomy in August, made mass arrests, limited communications and imposed curfew-like restrictions in some areas to contain a decades-long uprising against New Delhi's rule. Khan has appealed to Kashmiris to give him the chance to sway the international community and he is scheduled to address the United Nations General Assembly in New York on Friday, but patience appears to be in short supply in Pakistani Kashmir.

"We are all waiting for the United Nations...to see if the world can help us. Otherwise, we will try to break the LOC border," said Habib Urhman Afaqi, the president of the Jamaat-e-Islami political party for the district of Kolti, near the LOC. He said tens of thousands of men around the region were organizing by

word of mouth and social media. "We are preparing people, emotionally, and collectively we will be ready to fight on 27 September," Afaqi said.

As of yesterday, there were no signs of any gathering of people in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan's portion of Kashmir which is about 30 km from the LOC. Political leaders in the region said they were waiting until after Khan's speech to take action. Khan has strongly criticized New Delhi's actions in Kashmir in an international diplomacy campaign and cut off trade ties, but has condemned the plan to storm the LOC.

He said in a speech this month that anyone who attempted to cross the border risked drawing the ire of India, losing international sympathy and would be an "enemy of Kashmir". Pakistan's military said it would not allow any one to cross the LOC. "Pakistan is making all peaceful/diplomatic efforts to awaken world conscience to get them (Kashmiris) relief," the military's media wing said in an e-mail. "However, as stated earlier Pakistan keeps all options open and shall go to any extent as regards resolution of the Kashmir dispute."

'Canon fodder'

Both India and Pakistan are nuclear powers and have fought three wars since independence

in 1947, two of them over Kashmir. A spokesman for the Indian military warned against using Kashmiris as "canon fodder" and said he hoped Pakistan would ensure the LOC was not breached. "The Indian army is aware of the public utterances of Pakistani leaders aimed at instigating unarmed civilians," the spokesman said in response to a question from Reuters.

"It is a known fact that they are being sent on harm's way to create a humanitarian crisis to draw world attention," Khan told the New York Times on Wednesday that he would appeal in his speech for United Nations intervention in Kashmir but was not optimistic he could accomplish much in the short-term. He warned of large-scale violence in Indian Kashmir when the restrictions on civilian movements were lifted.

Kashmir has been Pakistan's single most pressing foreign policy issue since it was born out of British colonial India, but some Pakistani Kashmiris say Khan is being weak. "Imran Khan has nothing at stake and this decision whether to trample down or storm the LOC should be of the Kashmiris," said Subiyal Rasheed, a 35-year-old software engineer from the town of Rawalakot, who says he is speaking with other young men about storming the LOC en masse.

Memes using the hashtag "#TweetoSultan" went viral in recent weeks, a play on historic Muslim warrior Tipu Sultan and a dig at Khan

that his battle was being waged through ineffective emotional tweets. Khan told reporters in New York this week that he was doing everything he could. "We can't attack India, clearly that is not an option, and apart from that we're doing everything possible we could do," Khan said.

India, which says its revocation of Kashmir's special status will allow the region to develop economically, has long accused Pakistan of training, arming and sending militants to Kashmir. Pakistan denies this and says it only provides diplomatic and moral support to non-violent separatists in the region. Khan has stepped up his warnings this month that India is planning a 'false flag' attack on its own soil to give it an excuse to attack Pakistan, a claim India denies.

Syed Salahuddin, a Kashmiri militant commander who heads an alliance of over a dozen groups fighting Indian rule in Kashmir, said in a speech this month that "harsh steps" from Pakistan's government had hindered his groups' ability to take action. He later said in an interview that Pakistan should send troops across the border or convince the United Nations to send peacekeeping troops there. "Pakistan has been extending us political and moral support...but the Kashmiris want some practical steps," he told Reuters by phone, declining to answer further questions. — Reuters

Infant among at least 20 killed in Indonesian quake

AMBON CITY: At least 20 people were killed and dozens injured yesterday in a strong earthquake that rocked Indonesia's remote Maluku islands, triggering landslides that buried at least one of the victims, the disaster agency said. Terrified residents ran into the streets as buildings fell in around them when the 6.5-magnitude quake hit in the morning. "At least 100 people were injured and more than 2,000 evacuated," said national disaster mitigation spokesman Agus Wibowo who gave the latest death toll in statement. Among those killed was an infant, he said.

Earlier, local disaster agency officials said some victims had been killed by falling debris while one person was buried in a landslide. Another victim died of a heart attack as the tremor hit, while one woman died after falling off her motorbike while fleeing to higher ground, officials said. Residents of Ambon, a city of about 400,000 people, were seen helping injured residents in blood-stained clothes, while images showed wrecked homes with collapsed walls and rubble strewn on the ground.

Some patients fled a local hospital as the quake hit, prompting officials to set up makeshift shelters outside the building, an official said. "The impact was felt across Ambon city and surrounding areas," said Rahmat Triyono, head of the earthquake and tsunami division at Indonesia's Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysical Agency (BMKG). "Many people were woken up by the shaking... it felt like a truck was passing by." The US Geological Survey said the quake struck about 37 kilometers northeast of Ambon in Maluku province at a depth of 29 kilometers.



AMBON CITY: A resident inspects a collapsed wall of his house in Ambon, Indonesia's Maluku islands following a 6.5-magnitude earthquake yesterday. — AFP

The area was hit by at least two dozen aftershocks including one that measured 5.6 magnitude, Triyono said. An AFP reporter in Ambon described scenes of panic as people fled their houses when the quake struck. Architect Suryanto Soekarno said a construction site where he and his employees were working was rocked by the tremor. "It was a really hard shock," he said. "Filing cabinets fell over and my employees ran away to save themselves. Some were injured but thank God only with minor wounds."

Initial reports said the quake struck offshore, but later analysis found it hit onshore, raising the potential for damage, according to Indonesia's national disaster mitigation agency. Local BMKG head Oral Sem Wilar called for calm. "People were panicking and started to evacuate in some places, but we are trying to tell them there's no need to panic because there's no tsunami threat," he told AFP.— AFP

Indonesia student dies in law-change protests

KENDARI: An Indonesian student died yesterday as thousands hit the streets nationwide in a wave of opposition to a major overhaul of the country's criminal code and a bid to weaken its anti-corruption agency, police said. The death appeared to mark the first fatality in days of street battles across the Southeast Asian country, which have left hundreds injured and sparked a call from Amnesty International to probe what it described as "massive police violence" against protesters. The 21-year-old victim was rushed to hospital suffering from a chest wound and later died as riots erupted in Kendari city on Sulawesi island, where the local parliament was torched, authorities said.

But police denied playing a role in the death, amid social media claims that the engineering student was shot. "There was an injured student among the crowd. He was taken to the hospital and declared dead as doctors tried to save him. He had a wound on his right chest, but I cannot confirm what kind of injury it was," Southeast Sulawesi police spokesman Harry Golden Hart told Metro TV. "None of our officers carried live bullets... or even rubber bullets," he added.

The unrest was sparked by a proposed bill that includes dozens of law changes - from criminalizing pre-marital sex and restricting sales of contraceptives, to making it illegal to insult the president. There has also been a backlash against a separate bill that critics fear would dilute the powers of Indonesia's corruption-fighting agency - known as the KPK - including its ability to wire-tap graft suspects. The demonstrations across the archipelago are among the biggest since mass street protests in 1998 brought down the three-decade Suharto dictatorship.—AFP