

Indian government abandons Kashmir ceasefire, returns to a military approach that has not worked

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As the daily gunfights resume, the prospect of a political dialogue seems to recede farther.

The ceasefire had been welcomed as a departure from the Centre's hardline stance on Kashmir, where the political leadership seemed to give way to the military and guns did the talking. But with the return of combat operations, the steps towards a detente seem to have been retraced. It has also reinforced the idea, articulated by several commentators now, that the Centre does not have a coherent policy on Kashmir.

The ceasefire

It is true that the ceasefire came at a cost. The month ended with the killing of *Rising Kashmir* editor Shujaat Bukhari – who had greeted the pause in operations with such hope – and of his two personal security officers.

Militant groups rejected the ceasefire and the last few weeks have seen a surge in violence initiated by them. According to government figures, there were 66 “terror-related cases” between May 17 and June 13, up from 25 cases the month before. These included 22 grenade [attacks](#), 23 instances of indiscriminate firing and attacks on Army camps by militants. On the same day that Bukhari was killed, militants abducted tortured and killed a soldier going home on leave. According to reports, the lull also helped militant organisations regroup.

While combat operations were suspended, the Army allegedly opened fire on a crowd two days after the ceasefire was announced, injuring two girls. In the last two days of the ceasefire, two more youth were killed and others injured in firing by security forces. There are also eye-witness [accounts](#) of paramilitary forces mowing down

But some also argued that there were gains made during the ceasefire. According to the [Army](#), there was no fresh increase in militant recruitment and according to the police, there were signs that it had been [reduced](#). The police [claimed](#) that the situation had eased and that it had created conditions for boys who had taken up arms to return. There was also believed to be a dip in incidents of stone pelting, while civilian casualties at the hands of security forces went down.

Going by the precedent of the 2000-2001 ceasefire, when the Centre announced a unilateral halt to security operations, a rise in militant violence was perhaps inevitable. In the first month alone, there were 96 [attacks](#) by militants, killing 45 security personnel, 96 civilians and 61 militants. The Centre persevered with the ceasefire for five months, however, along with pushing for talks.

The question now is, can the long-term gains of halting operations outweigh the losses? The costs of abandoning the ceasefire may be steep.

The return of the ‘encounter’

As operations resume, the old cycle of violence will begin again. In the first few months of this year, almost daily gunfights erupted across the Valley, particularly South Kashmir. To begin with, they took a heavy toll on the lives of civilians, militants and security forces – as of April 10, at least one person died every day in Jammu and Kashmir.

Second, these “encounters”, as they are locally called, and the vast funerals that followed, have been identified as the most potent recruiters for militancy. As of May 3, at least 45 youth had joined militant ranks in 2018, according to some [estimates](#).

Third, these gunfights pitted the security forces against the local population. Over time, they became spectacles which unfolded in a familiar sequence – the search operation, the laying of the security cordon, the shower of stones from protestors, the exchange of fire, the shedding of blood and the public funeral, followed by shutdowns to protest against killings. One [gunfight](#) in Kulgam ended in four civilian deaths but no militant casualties, and local residents were jubilant that they had compelled the forces to turn back. Often, operations ended with security forces blowing up houses where militants had taken shelter and displacing families. These houses still dot the landscape, symbols of what local residents call “zulm”, or oppression, by the state.

As massive gunfights swept through South Kashmir in April, Bukhari had [called out](#) the government’s “encounter strategy”, pointing out that the military approach had failed. It did not work then, it is unlikely to ensure a lasting peace now.

The fading hope of dialogue

Meanwhile, after a month of conciliatory noises, the government was unable to build on the relative quiet and start the process of talks. Singh made statements about talking to “right-minded” if not “like-minded” people, while separatists in Srinagar demanded greater clarity on the terms of talks.

Although the government appointed an interlocutor to talk to various groups in Kashmir last year, it quickly undermined this process by making it very clear that not even greater autonomy within the Indian Constitution was up for discussion, never mind “azadi”. It is increasingly clear that the government is not willing to budge from old rigid positions.

Take the ministry of external affairs’ reaction to the United Nations human rights report on Kashmir. It was dismissed as “tendentious” and “fallacious”; the motives behind it were questioned. The government seems unprepared to address basic human rights issues, raised by domestic courts, civil society and the press before they were raised by the United Nations. Tackling larger political questions that surround the Kashmir dispute seems to be a distant prospect. As the guns boom again, it will recede farther.

For all its pitfalls, the Ramzan ceasefire had been a step in the right direction, an attempt by the political establishment to take charge and refuse to speak the language of violence. But there were forces intent on derailing the process, while many hardliners within the country berated the government for holding fire. As of now, they seem to have prevailed.

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