

Spate of Hindu Killings Precedes Kashmir Meeting

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NEW DELHI, India, May 1 — Thirty five Hindus were killed in recent days in two separate incidents in the Indian-administered portion of the disputed Kashmir province, the police said. The killings were believed to be handiwork of Islamist militants just days before a scheduled meeting between the Indian prime minister and Kashmiri separatists.

In one incident, gunmen stormed a village in a district called Doda, dragged Hindu villagers from their homes and shot dead 22. In another, in neighboring Udhampur district, suspected militants kidnapped 13 villagers from a remote mountainous spot; four of their bodies were found lying in the woods late Sunday, while the rest were discovered today, according to police.

Even by the standards of blood-soaked Kashmir, it was a particularly grisly pair of incidents and the deadliest violence since peace talks began more than two years ago between India and Pakistan, neighbors and rivals on the question of Kashmir. They are particularly worrisome because they are so plainly designed to fuel Hindu-Muslim tensions.

Their impact is certainly likely to be felt on talks, slated to begin Wednesday on the future of Kashmir, between the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and a coalition of Kashmiri separatist leaders, known as the All Parties Hurriyat Conference.

Both the prime minister and the leaders of the Hurriyat were swift to condemn the violence today. But that did not mean that the negotiations between them promised to yield anything nearly as swiftly. The last time the Prime Minister announced a roundtable on Kashmir in March, Hurriyat leaders did not show up in protest. Along with the government of Pakistan, they have lately increased their criticism of New Delhi, saying that the Indian government is dragging its feet on a resolution to the Kashmir dispute.

"People of Kashmir have rejected and rebuffed terrorists repeatedly," Mr. Singh said in a statement today.

Killings targeting Hindu and Sikh villagers had become a routine form of terror some years ago when relations between India and Pakistan were at their worst. The most infamous of these

massacres came in March 2000, on the eve of President Bill Clinton's state visit to India, when 37 Sikhs were murdered in Chattisinghpura village.

Peace talks between India and Pakistan have, even by the Indian government's assessment, radically reduced violence in Indian Kashmir. But killings, blamed on both security forces and militants, have hardly vanished.

The coming months are crucial for the peace process. It is usually in the summer, after the snows have melted on the rugged mountains of Kashmir, that Indians accuse Pakistan-backed insurgents of crossing over to the Indian side of the de facto border and stirring up trouble. Only if the Indians are convinced that infiltration and violence is down are they likely to agree to any concrete deals on Kashmir, including pulling back troops from the Siachen Glacier, one of the costliest and deadliest missions for the armies of both countries.

Yusuf Jameel contributed reporting from Srinagar for this article.