

Slurs and slingshots: Kashmiris allege abuse amid lockdown

By **Aijaz Hussain**
The Associated Press

SRINAGAR, India — Farooq Ahmed Wani was driving home on his motorcycle with his six-year-old niece in India-controlled Kashmir when they were stopped by paramilitary soldiers, one of whom he said used a verbal slur.

“I objected and asked him ‘Why are you using this kind of language? This is not done,’” Wani recalled. The soldier was furious, Wani said, and without warning aimed a slingshot directly in the face of his niece and fired a marble into her right eye.

As the soldiers left, his niece, Muneefa Nazir, howled in pain as blood dripped down her face.

Wani’s account, told from near the little girl’s bedside in a Srinagar hospital, is just one of the stories of alleged Indian abuse slowly trickling out of disputed Kashmir since an indefinite curfew and near-total communications blackout were put in place in early August, the night before Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalist government revoked the Muslim-majority region’s special constitutional protections.

Police and soldiers have since fanned out across the region of 7 million people, enveloping it in a maze of razor wire and steel barricades, and authorities have suspended all telephone and internet services.

The lockdown has forced an eerie quiet on the region’s main city, Srinagar, even during the Muslim festival of Eid al-Adha, when the streets should have been bustling with people going to pray and to shop for the holiday. While there is an ongoing ban on public assembly, that was eased slightly for the holiday and the faithful were allowed to go to mosques, though only alone or in pairs.

That was the day Wani said his niece



was attacked.

Despite the lockdown, anti-India protests and clashes with security forces occur daily, mostly when soldiers begin to withdraw around dusk. Young Kashmiri men barrage the police and soldiers with stones and abuse, shouting slogans demanding the end of Indian rule.

The demands aren’t new. But the change to Kashmir’s constitutional status on August 5 — coupled with a bill passed the following day downgrading the state of Jammu and Kashmir into two federally administered territories — has allowed India to strengthen its hold on the disputed Himalayan region, claimed by both India and Pakistan.

Shelling between Indian and Pakistani forces over the line of control, the mutually agreed upon border dividing Kashmir into parts administered by each country, was expected to escalate tensions in the region.

In the same hospital ward as Nazir, 20-year-old student Suhail Ahmed was also undergoing treatment. He said he

came under buckshot fire from paramilitary soldiers as he was leaving the mosque after Friday prayers. His right eye was injured and pellets were embedded in his abdomen and right arm.

“It felt like I had been put on fire,” he said.

The hospital has treated at least two dozen injured people since August 6, including about 10 people with pellets lodged in their eyes, a hospital administrator said, speaking on condition of anonymity because authorities have barred medical staff and hospital officials from talking to reporters.

Moses Dhinakaran, deputy inspector general and a spokesman for the Indian government’s Central Reserve Police Force, said he had no knowledge of Nazir’s case. He declined to comment on paramilitaries’ use of force and did not comment on whether paramilitary soldiers have used slingshots since the lockdown began.

Associated Press journalists have

SLURS & SLINGSHOTS. Kashmiri girl Muneefa Nazir, age six, lies in a hospital bed after being wounded by a marble fired from a slingshot used by an Indian paramilitary soldier in Srinagar, in Indian-controlled Kashmir. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi defended his government’s controversial measure to strip the disputed Kashmir region of its statehood and special constitutional provisions in an Independence Day speech, as about 7 million Kashmiris stayed indoors for the 11th day of an unprecedented security lockdown and communications blackout. (AP Photo/Aijaz Hussain)

documented soldiers using slingshots with marbles to disperse protests in the past.

Security forces also began using buckshot, locally known as pellet shotguns, in Indian-administered Kashmir in 2010, when massive protests erupted against Indian rule in the region. Officials defended them as non-lethal weapons meant to control large, unruly crowds.

However, at least 18 people have been killed and thousands have been injured from pellets, according to the Jammu-Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society human-rights group.

During a widespread public uprising in 2016, thousands of protesters and bystanders were wounded by the pellets, including hundreds who were blinded in one or both eyes, fuelling anger locally as well as criticism abroad. The accuracy of the shotguns, which spray hundreds of metal pellets in a single blast, is poor.

Eye specialists will determine whether Nazir needs surgery, two of her doctors said, also speaking on the condition of anonymity due to restrictions on talking to the press.

The six-year-old lies in her hospital bed, her right eye covered by a bandage. She’s now sleeping peacefully, surrounded by relatives, a marked difference from the hours after she was assaulted.

“She was crying the whole night,” said Sara Ali, the girl’s grandmother. “Her cries cut through my heart like a dagger.”

Over 2 million Muslims visit Mecca for hajj pilgrimage

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the hajj. Charities and wealthier Muslims often also help fund those unable to cover the costs.

In addition to being financially costly, the hajj is physically demanding, involving much walking and travel between various points along the route.

To ease the journey, the kingdom recently unveiled the first phase of a new high-speed train connecting pilgrims between holy sites in the cities of Mecca and Medina. The kingdom also has a new e-visa system in place for pilgrims.

Still, the hajj remains a precarious journey. In 2015, several thousand pilgrims died in a stampede and crush of pilgrims in Mina on a narrow pedestrian-only road leading to a site where Muslims take part in the symbolic stoning of the devil during the last three days of the hajj. The government never released a final death count.

To curb the potential for a viral outbreak of any kind, Saudi Arabia this year stopped issuing visas to people from Congo, citing the Ebola outbreak there.

In Mina, most pilgrims spent the night in air-conditioned tents before heading to Mount Arafat, an area about 12 miles east of Mecca. There, the more than 2 million pilgrims stand shoulder to shoulder for an emotional day of repentance and supplication at the site where the Prophet Muhammad delivered his final sermon, calling for equality and unity among Muslims.

“We feel very excited and will pray for all people,” said Malaysian pilgrim Farida bin Abdulrahman as she prepared to depart toward Mina for the evening.

Batrawy reported from Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

China bans movies, actors from prominent Taiwan film awards

By **Christopher Bodeen**
The Associated Press

BEIJING — China said it is banning Chinese movies and actors from participating in Taiwan’s Golden Horse Awards, one of the Asian film industry’s most prestigious honors, as Beijing ramps up economic and political pressure on the island it claims as its own territory.

The one-sentence announcement on the microblog of *China Film News*, a newspaper affiliated with the government film regulator, gave no reason for the suspension, but it came amid rising tensions over Taiwan’s refusal to recognize being part of a Chinese territory to eventually be brought under Beijing’s rule.

Even without the ban, Chinese artists might have found it difficult to make it to the November 23 ceremony. Beijing recently issued a ban on solo travel to the island beginning September 1 as part of measures to inflict an economic cost for its failure to obey.

Chinese participation was already in doubt following last year’s ceremony, which was marked by Chinese displeasure over remarks in an acceptance speech by documentary director Fu Yue calling on the world to recognize Taiwan as an independent country, something only a handful of nations currently do.

Chinese participants refused to appear on stage, made pointed remarks about Taiwan and China being members of the same family, and then declined to attend the banquet reception following the show.

Asked about the announcement, the organizing committee said it was disappointed but the show would go on as scheduled.

“The Committee regrets to be informed of the news, if it is confirmed,” it said in an e-mailed statement. “The jury process of Golden Horse Awards is ongoing and will continue as planned, and all Golden Horse events will take place as usual.”

Chinese entrants have been big winners at the show since they were first invited to attend in 1996, with China’s Xu Zheng winning best actor last year for his work in *Dying to Survive*. Taiwan’s Central News Agency said the festival was still in the process of choosing films and it wasn’t immediately clear if any from China had already been withdrawn.

Presidential office spokesman Ernesto Ting Yun-kung said China’s move “not only harmed exceptional members of the Chinese film industry but also positive exchanges between the sides.”

“Culture has no borders and art especially should not face

political barriers. No matter what the reason, it’s not a smart move to prevent those in arts and culture from participating in this sort of a film industry event that encourages free creation and welcomes multiple viewpoints,” Ting said.

Fu set off a firestorm of criticism in China last year after she said during her acceptance speech that her biggest hope was for “our country” to be regarded as an “independent entity.” Her film, *Our Youth in Taiwan*, won best documentary at the awards.

Taiwan split from mainland China amid civil war in 1949, but Beijing considers the self-ruled island part of its territory.

Chinese lambasted Fu on China’s Twitter-like Weibo platform following her win, sharing posts under the hashtag “Not one speck of China can go missing” and a map of China that includes Taiwan and territories it claims in the South China Sea.

Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, who is loathed by Beijing for her pro-independence stance, expressed her support for Fu, saying in a Facebook post that the annual awards highlight the freedoms that set Taiwan apart from China.

“Here (in Taiwan) there aren’t people who will disappear or be silenced for expressing differing viewpoints,” she wrote, “and we also don’t have sensitive terms that are censored on the internet.”

Academy Award-winning Taiwanese director Ang Lee, whose films include *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Brokeback Mountain* and who chaired the awards committee, appeared to anticipate the backlash to Fu’s speech, telling reporters after the ceremony, “I hope that no one will come to interfere (with the awards).”

Entertainment industry figures in Taiwan and Hong Kong have routinely been blacklisted and had their work banned from mainland China after they expressed pro-independence or pro-democracy views.

Along with cutting numbers of Chinese visitors to Taiwan, China has been luring away the island’s remaining diplomatic allies and preventing its representatives from participating in international gatherings. Culture and sports events have also become targets, with Taiwan last year losing the right to hold the East Asian Youth Games under reported pressure from China.

China holds its own film awards, known as the Golden Rooster, but their influence is constrained by the strong ideological controls on the arts exerted by the ruling Communist Party that largely bar darker or alternative lifestyle themes.

Associated Press writers Juwon Park in Hong Kong and Tajing Wu in Taipei, Taiwan, contributed to this report.