

Ex-Kashmiri Separatist Commander Assassinated

Islamic Leader Pursued Dialogue to End Conflict

By Rama Lakshmi
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NEW DELHI, March 23 -- Masked men today fatally shot a former leader of the largest Islamic guerrilla group in Kashmir who had favored dialogue to resolve the armed rebellion in the disputed region.

Abdul Majid Dar, 47, former chief commander of Hizb ul-Mujaheddin, was killed in Sopore, 30 miles north of Srinagar, the summer capital of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, police officials said. News agencies in Srinagar received calls from two separatist groups claiming responsibility for the attack, the Associated Press reported.

"Abdul Majid Dar died on the spot when gunmen opened fire on his car, near his brother's home," a police official said. "His sister and mother were also injured in the attack."

[On Monday, police said suspected Muslim militants shot dead 24 Hindus -- 11 men, 11 women and two children -- Sunday night in the village of Nadi Marg, about 30 miles south of Srinagar. No one claimed responsibility for the attack.]

Hizb ul-Mujaheddin, which is fighting to end Indian control of Kashmir, is led by former politicians and composed largely of Kashmiri youths.

In July 2000, Dar declared a three-month cease-fire and attended talks with senior Indian officials. The truce was canceled within days, and a year later the supreme commander of Hizb ul-Mujaheddin, who is based in Pakistan, expelled Dar and his supporters from the group. No reason was given for Dar's expulsion, but analysts said he was thrown out because the Pakistani-based leadership believed he had turned toward India.

The short-lived truce was followed by a surge of bloodshed.

Both India, which is majority Hindu, and Pakistan, which is Muslim, claim Kashmir, a largely Muslim region. A de facto border between the two countries has divided the territory since 1948. Muslim insurgents, seeking independence and backed by Pakistan, have been battling Indian security forces inside the Indian-controlled portion of Kashmir since 1989. More than 61,000 people have been killed in the insurgency.

Last summer, a prominent separatist leader, Abdul Ghani Lone, who advocated a conciliatory approach to resolve the dispute over Kashmir, was fatally shot by unidentified gunmen.

A senior Indian intelligence official in Kashmir said two factions of Hizb ul-Mujaheddin clashed violently in Pakistan in January, and two of Dar's loyalists who met with New Delhi officials during the cease-fire have also been gunned down.

"The message is clear," K. Rajendra Kumar, inspector general of police in Srinagar, said in a telephone interview. "Anyone who talks of dialogue and peace process in Kashmir will be targeted."

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