

## Homesick Militants Are Offered a Way Back to Kashmir

Written by Gardiner Harris

Friday, 06 September 2013 00:00 -

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[From [New York Times](#) ]: LOLAB VALLEY, Kashmir — Many of them left as teenagers, impulsive boys fired by indignation who sneaked across the border to Pakistan-controlled territory without telling their mothers.

But even militants get homesick.

“My first contact with my mother was three years after I’d left, and my parents had no idea what had happened to me,” said Abdul Hamid Rather, who left India-controlled Kashmir in 2001 when he was 14. “She was weeping, and I was weeping.”

More than 350 former militants have returned here to India-controlled Kashmir recently in a quiet new effort to deal with the growing problem of rehabilitating some of the thousands who left home in recent decades to fight for Pakistan in its long-running separatist feud with India over the disputed territory.

“It turns out that it’s not as dangerous as it might seem,” said Shuja Nawaz, the director of the South Asia Center at the Atlantic Council, a research group in Washington. “It’s probably better to have them under scrutiny in India than out of reach in Pakistan.”

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In addition to the prospect of seeing aging parents, Kashmiris, in their bowl-shaped valley and its breathtaking vistas, find an unusually powerful incentive for putting down arms.

Under the new program, once a former fighter has decided he wants to return, his family files an application with the Indian authorities. If there are no accusations that he attacked India or killed anyone, the application is usually approved. After that the former jihadi is required to meet with the police regularly for at least a year.

There have been hiccups in the program, in part because Pakistan has chosen not to participate. Returnees must fly to Nepal and cross into India by bus or car. And like all peace efforts between India and Pakistan, it has been overwhelmed this summer by some of the deadliest fighting in a decade between the nuclear-armed rivals. Dozens have died, and life near the Line of Control that separates the Indian and Pakistani claims has once again become dangerous and uncertain.

But even as fighting continues, former militants continue to trickle back into India-controlled territory, where returnees say they have found life both better and worse than they expected.

Ghulam Mohammad Mir, 27, was 14 and just finishing the ninth grade in 2000 when a recruiter he had once played cricket with asked if he wanted to cross the line. The border was fairly

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porous at the time, and the recruiter told Mr. Mir and four of his classmates that they could return after just a few days, Mr. Mir said.

It was the first of what Mr. Mir and his friends would soon discover were many lies. "We were trapped there," he said.

They were sent to camps, where for eight months they received intensive religious indoctrination. Then for another eight months they trained in weaponry, including machine guns. At the end of his training, Mr. Mir made clear that he had no stomach for war, he said. So he left the camps and began driving an auto-rickshaw. In 2007, he married a Pakistani woman and soon had three children.

He spent all of his savings to return to India-controlled territory last year, and has since started a small tea shop. Of the four boys who ran away with him, he said, two were killed, one returned and one remains in Pakistan-controlled territory.

Mr. Mir said that his first year back was challenging. Neighbors were suspicious. His paperwork was not in order. But he is convinced that his children will have a better life in India than they would have had in Pakistan, with its myriad economic, social and political problems.

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“My life is better here,” he said. “I am living with my mother, and that is a pleasure.”

Khazir Mohammad Sheikh, 32, is less cheery. He left the Lolab Valley in 1997 when he was 16. He had been working in a bakery after leaving school at 13, but fighting led to the bakery’s closing and his own decision to leave for Pakistan.

He is vague about how he spent his first years in Pakistan-controlled territory, but he married in 2002 and soon had three children. After his wife died a year ago, he decided to return.

Now, he said, he is stuck in a no man’s land. The Indian government has yet to give him the identity papers he needs to land a job, and he lacks the money needed to start a bakery. He believes the Indian government owes him a job or a grant so that he can get his life restarted.

“O.K., we made a little mistake and crossed over to the Pakistan side,” he said. “Now we’re back, and all I’m asking for is a little help. I want a job.”

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Mr. Sheikh spoke while sitting in a plastic chair with his 2-year-old son on his lap. Two of his four brothers and a dozen nieces and nephews stood around as he spoke. None had left for Pakistan. The prodigal son, Mr. Sheikh was asking for benefits his own brothers have not gotten.

One of those brothers, Ghulam Nabi Sheikh, works as a day laborer and eyed his brother skeptically.

“We’re happy that my brother is back,” he said. “If the government can help him, all well and good. If it cannot, he will find his own way.”

Omar Abdullah, the chief minister of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, acknowledged “teething problems” in the returnee program. Getting the men and their families appropriate paperwork and educational placements has been difficult, he said. “Their citizenship is a gray area we have to sort out,” he said.

That so many of the returned men expected to be given cash and government jobs has been a surprise, Mr. Abdullah said. One problem he did anticipate was interference from Indian security agencies, and they have acted as expected, Mr. Abdullah said.

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The case of Liaqat Ali Shah, who returned in March, is often cited. Mr. Shah was approved to come, but a relative who was supposed to meet him, his wife and daughter at the border with identity cards failed to appear.

He was then arrested, hustled to New Delhi and accused of planning terrorist attacks on India. The Delhi police even unveiled a cache of weapons and explosives they claimed that Mr. Shah had stashed in a guesthouse near a famous Delhi mosque.

But the Kashmiri authorities vouched for Mr. Shah, and the case against him fell apart. Investigators have since determined that the weapons stashed in the guesthouse were left by a man living at a Delhi police barracks. Mr. Abdullah called the case an obvious frame-up.

In his return, Mr. Shah has done more to embarrass Indian authorities than he ever could have done in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. Sitting on a carpet in a rustic Kashmiri house a 20-minute hike from the nearest road, Mr. Shah related the story of his arrest and imprisonment with great delight.

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“I am planning to hold a press conference!” Mr. Shah said as his father-in-law, a wizened old man wearing something akin to a magician’s hat, sat cross-legged and nodded.

Like many returnees, Mr. Shah said he expected the Indian government to give him money, nearly \$10,000, he said. “I read it in the papers that they were promising us that kind of money,” he said.

It is an expectation that bewilders Mr. Abdullah, but he said the program was working for most people and would certainly remain in place.

“You’re not a terrorist for life,” he said. “It’s very possible that you will change your mind.”

Hari Kumar contributed reporting.