

**INDO-PAK TENSION**

# Kashmir schools shut down after deadly shelling

*Pakistan may expel two Indian diplomats for spying*

Agence France-Presse · Srinagar

HUNDREDS of schools were ordered to close indefinitely in Kashmir Wednesday after shelling by Indian and Pakistani troops in the disputed region killed 14 civilians in two days.

Authorities on the Indian-administered side of Kashmir, which is split between the two nations, said nearly 300 schools had been ordered to close from Wednesday morning, following the death of eight civilians on Tuesday in mortar shelling along the highly militarised border.

Officials on the Pakistani

side said around 25 schools would be closed in the Naryal sector for the rest of the week due to shelling by Indian forces which had killed six civilians since Monday.

The closures represent another blow to a beleaguered education system already hit by widespread closures in Srinagar, the largest city in Indian-administered Kashmir, and arson attacks on schools.

Eight civilians including two children were killed on Tuesday when mortar bombs hit two locations in the Samba and Rajouri sectors, in the Jammu region of

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## Kashmir schools shut down

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the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Nearly 300 schools, both private and government-run, have been asked to close down in Jammu, Samba and Kathua districts, Pawan Kotwal, a top official in Jammu, said.

He said the border remained relatively calm overnight with only a few cases of cross-border firing in some areas.

On Monday Pakistani authorities said an 18-month-old girl was among six civilians killed on its side of the border in firing by Indian forces in the Jammu region.

Islamabad summoned a senior Indian diplomat to protest over the killings.

The closure order in the Jammu region comes at a time when teaching at many government and private schools in Srinagar and elsewhere in the Kashmir Valley remains severely disrupted.

Although schools are officially open, many pupils and teachers have been

unable to attend class for months because of a 52-day-long curfew and a continuing shutdown called by separatist groups, that has severely hit normal life.

The region has suffered its deadliest violence in the last six years – with at least 90 people killed in street protests triggered by the killing of a popular separatist leader by Indian forces in Kashmir in July.

Nearly 30 schools have been torched in the Kashmir Valley since July but no-one has been arrested for the arson attacks.

Indian and Pakistani troops have regularly exchanged fire across the Line of Control – the de-facto border in Kashmir – as well as along their undisputed part of the border since a militant attack on an Indian army base on September 18 left 19 soldiers dead.

Each country accuses the other of violating a 2003 ceasefire and engaging in 'unprovoked firing'.

Eight Indian troops have

also died in the border skirmishes.

India's border security force (BSF) accused Pakistani troops of 'deliberately targeting' the civilian population after Tuesday's killings, which also left 22 people injured.

'Pakistani forces are firing heavy mortars deliberately towards Indian civilian areas. BSF never fires towards any Pakistani civilian area,' DK Upadhyay, a top BSF commander told reporters on Wednesday.

Relations between the two countries have plummeted in recent months since the attack on the army base, the deadliest in more than a decade.

India has blamed Pakistan-based militants for the attack and its prime minister Narendra Modi recently characterised the regime in Islamabad as the 'mother-ship of terrorism'.

Kashmir has been divided between India and Pakistan since the end of British rule in 1947. Both claim the

territory in full.

Several rebel groups have fought for decades an estimated 500,000 Indian soldiers deployed in the Himalayan territory, demanding independence for the region or its merger with Pakistan.

In another development, Pakistan may expel two Indian diplomats in Islamabad for spying and has revealed their names, Pakistani media said on Wednesday, the latest tit-for-tat measure amid worsening ties between the nuclear-armed neighbours.

Pakistani officials believe one of the two Indian men worked for the RAW spy agency, while the other spied for India's Intelligence Bureau, said Pakistani Geo TV and most other channels, citing anonymous sources.

In New Delhi, Vikas Swarup, the spokesman for India's ministry of external affairs, said the ministry was 'aware' of the media reports.

'We have yet to receive any official communication in the matter,' Swarup added.