

Forum in Newark focuses on bloodshed in war-torn Indian region of Kashmir

Published Sunday, June 10, 2001, in the San Jose Mercury News

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Mercury News Kashmir, India's only Muslim-dominated region, has become a deadly battleground between India and Islamic fundamentalists who want to take it over, Hira L. Fotedar, the vice-president of Eaton Technology in Michigan, said at a forum Saturday. The event was the Indo-American Kashmir Forum held at the Hilton Hotel in Newark. Once a Himalayan paradise, Kashmir has been torn by bloodshed since India and Pakistan gained independence in 1947. Both countries make claims to it and have fought wars over it. The conflict deepened in 1989, when Muslim Kashmiris fought to end Indian rule, and India waged a battle against them. Pakistan sent *mujahedeen* veterans of the Afghan-Soviet war to aid the separatists. In 1999, the two countries stood at the brink of full-scale war. When he was in office, President Bill Clinton described Kashmir as one of the "most dangerous places in the world." Today the insurrection continues, partly as a separatist movement and partly as an Islamic holy war, according to D.R. Sardesai, professor of history at the University of California-Los Angeles, who also spoke at the forum. He said the situation has been aggravated by the participation of young militant adherents of the fundamentalist Taliban movement. In just the past two weeks, 85 people were killed. More than 34,000 have died since 1989. "There's no solution in sight," was the pessimistic conclusion of another speaker, Yossef Bodansky, director of the U.S. Congressional Task Force on Terrorism. He said that Kashmir is a "classic case of state sponsorship taking over a nationalist indigenous movement." Along with most other speakers, Bodansky blamed Pakistan's military rulers for fomenting the insurgency in Kashmir and along other parts of the border it shares with India. Few Pakistanis were in attendance at the forum. Mumtaz Wani, a lawyer who works in Washington, D.C., was one of the few Muslim Kashmiris to speak. He said the problem in Kashmir is one that Hindus and Muslims must resolve together. U.S. Rep. Jim McDermott, D-Wash., co-chairman of the India Caucus in Congress, was the keynote speaker at lunch. McDermott, a physician, became interested in India because of the AIDS epidemic. "I've been fascinated with the sub-continent ever since," he said. He has visited India 16 times. McDermott is hopeful about Kashmir. "If the Irish can find a way to resolve their differences, there has to be a way in Kashmir," McDermott said. "At this point, there's not much the U.S. can do except put pressure on both sides to sit down and talk." A summit conference between India and Pakistan concerning Kashmir is scheduled for August. About 140 people attended the second international conference on Kashmir. More than 400 came to the evening event, which featured a musical show and a speech by U.S. Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose. Contact T.T. Nhu at tnhu@sjmercury.com or (510) 790-7317.