



Villagers play tag with death in India's Kashmir.

By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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NAMBLA, India, Aug 6 (Reuters) - The people of Nambla are sitting ducks in the world's deadliest game of target practice, and their fear hangs in the air, thick with the smell of cordite.

At least 500 Pakistani shells have landed in this once idyllic village of 921 tin-roofed houses since Islamabad and New Delhi began a lethal artillery duel just over a week ago.

Five minutes after we clambered down a series of steep paths cut into rocky inclines bordering a gurgling brook, there was a "whoosh" followed by an ear-splitting explosion as a shell landed in a culvert near Nambla's high school, a mere 100 yards (metres) from where we stood.

Two more shells fell in quick succession among the walnut trees that grow beside fields of maize.

Minutes later Indian field guns opened up with a distinctive "whump".

"The Pakistanis have turned our village into a firing range," said Habibullah Kakroo, who taught mathematics at the school until life was brought to a halt by the unending barrage.

Nambla's "numberdar" or headman, Matwali Mir, said at least 35 homes had been destroyed by the bombardment. His neighbours have become adept at telling whether the thump of cannon signals friendly or enemy fire, and nobody has died in Nambla.

But in several surrounding villages, as we climbed and slithered to the urging of villagers who warned we might die if we did not hurry, the artillery has claimed at least 47 lives since talks between Indian and Pakistani diplomats on renewing a stalled dialogue broke down over the issue of Kashmir.

Skirmishes between the subcontinental foes, now capable of menacing each other with nuclear weapons, are common in the dry summer months. Indian authorities say Pakistani guerrillas slip across the porous frontier under cover of the shooting.

But this year's shooting has been a new and frightening experience for the mainly Moslem villagers along the "line of control" that divides the armies of India and Pakistan.

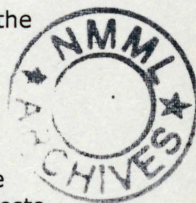
Nambla's headman said that never before, in the three wars India and Pakistan have fought, were civilians targeted by Pakistan. Nestled on hillsides four and a half km (2.5 miles) from the frontier, Nambla had seemed far enough from the guns.

"We are simple villagers surviving on our crops and the milk from our livestock," said schoolteacher Kakroo. "Both countries swear they want to eradicate poverty. Now it looks like they're trying to eradicate the poor."

Gaping holes, roofs turned into colanders by shrapnel, and blackened craters dotting the fields testify to the ferocity of the Pakistani gunners.

It is a game of roulette in which one never knows which shell will land close enough to kill or maim.

Lieutenant-Colonel K.N.P. Nair of India's 3rd Bihar battalion said the Pakistanis were firing medium-range artillery ranging from 105-mm field guns to 155-mm howitzers whose shells can land across mountain crests up to 40 km (25 miles) away.



The Line of Control, which froze the ceasefire line where the armies of the two nations stopped shooting in 1947, meanders over lush hills dotted with walnut and pear groves, across the Jhelum river, and down brilliant-green fields.

"Our gunners lay down 'suppressive fire'," Nair said. On an open field about 10 km from Nambla, Indian gunners loosed a deafening fusillade from a battery of Swedish-made Bofors 155-mm guns, raising a cloud of dust as we pulled up alongside.

Mir said the lives of the people of Nambla had been turned upside down by the death and destruction. "We haven't eaten a proper meal in several days," he said. "Every time we brew a cup of tea there's that whistling sound again, and we run for cover."

For the Hindus in a couple of villages near the Line of Control who have doggedly refused to quit their homes, the border firing has brought a new and cruel twist.

Jiya Lal, Manohar Lal and Suraj Prakash, from the villages of Bandi and Lagama, said they had braved eight years of a fierce Moslem insurgency to stay put, but now they were sandwiched between the militants and the Pakistani guns.

"We used to earn a livelihood by driving trucks, but we haven't been able to stir out for weeks now," said Jiya Lal. "Many of our fellow Hindus fled the Kashmir valley after the revolt broke out, but it's too late for us to do anything now."

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