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Yasin Malik warns risk of more Kashmir violence

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NEW DELHI: Kashmir risks a return to militancy and violent protests if New Delhi fails to push a stalled peace process in the disputed region, one of the state's most influential separatist leaders said on Tuesday.

Yasin Malik's comments came amid a spurt in militant attacks in Kashmir in the last week, combined with diplomatic limbo between India and Pakistan that further complicates US efforts to battle Islamist militancy in the region.

Talks over Kashmir between the Congress party-led government and separatist groups broke down in 2006.

While at least 47,000 people have been killed since the start of an insurgency in 1989, the region has gradually become free of violence in the last few years.

Huge and mostly peaceful protests by pro-separatist Kashmiris in 2008 and 2009 sparked hopes New Delhi may try to reignite a peace process, but both sides made little progress amid mutual suspicion and New Delhi's fraught ties with Islamabad after the Mumbai attacks.

"The need of the hour is to restore the credibility of the dialogue process," Yasin Malik, head of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front which pushes for a peaceful campaign for Kashmiri independence, told Reuters during a conference in New Delhi.

"It has taken us so many years with a very hard effort to bring a transition from violent movement to non-violent movement. This transition needs to be respected ... If Kashmiris are not given respect they could fall back to a violent past."

Many experts see a peace process in Kashmir as key to improving relations with Pakistan, allowing Islamabad to divert its resources from its eastern border to focus on helping the United States battle Al-Qaeda and Taliban militants.

But New Delhi continues to drag its feet over holding talks with Pakistan, which lays claim to Kashmir, saying that it must first crack down on militants behind the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

After a year of relative calm, at least seven militants have been killed in separate gunbattles in Indian Kashmir over the last week, including one incident when militants holed up in a hotel in the heart of Srinagar for nearly 24 hours.

"For 15 years I have been propagating non-violence but ... there are signs of frustration among both the youth and the older people, because there were huge protests and no one seemed to listen," said Malik, a former militant.

Mostly Muslim Kashmir is at the core of decades of hostility between India and Pakistan and was the cause of two of their three wars since independence from British rule in 1947. They both claim it in full but rule it in part.

Malik's history underscores the problems facing the peaceful separatist cause. Imprisoned as a militant in 1990, he renounced violence and declared a ceasefire in 1994, but he has been often imprisoned and his peaceful aims have so far given little fruit.

"Since the ceasefire I have lost 600 colleagues and been arrested 200 times. There have been three attempts on my life," Malik said, before rolling up his trousers to show what he said were the marks of torture by Indian security forces.

Last year, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh offered to help resume talks over Pakistan and Kashmir. Little headway is visible, but some officials say a dialogue between the rivals is being carried on outside public scrutiny.

"I have no reason to doubt his integrity," Malik said. "But he is surrounded by military bureaucracy, he is surrounded by civil bureaucracy. Some of these people are constraining him."

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