

More troops for Amarnath Yatra

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NEW DELHI: The government has decided to deploy an additional 5,000 paramilitary personnel to secure the Amarnath Yatra, security officials have said, amid prevailing unrest in Kashmir through which the annual pilgrimage route runs.

“There is already a permanent deployment of more than 45,000 personnel from the central

paramilitary forces...During the Amarnath Yatra, the Centre will deploy around 225 companies (around 22,500 troops) of central forces along the yatra route. Last year, the additional central deployment was around 175 to 180 companies. This year we have posted around 5,000 more boots on ground,” said a home ministry official on the condition of anonymity.

The official added the additional deployment for the yatra,

which begins on June 28, is due to the adverse security scenario in the area. Kashmir has been on edge since a 21-year-old man was run over by a paramilitary vehicle targeted by protesters in Srinagar last week. A number of grenade attacks have also rocked the Valley at a time when the Centre has enforced a unilateral cessation of security operations during Ramzan.

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Amarnath

“We too do not have any specific intelligence that militants may target Amarnath yatris,” said a central security official who keeps a watch on Kashmir-related developments.

But security forces are not

leaving anything to chance as last year on July 10, a bus carrying Amarnath yatris was attacked by militants near Batengoo in South Kashmir along the yatra route, killing seven pilgrims and injuring another 18.

The attack was a wake-up call for the security establishment that has since then tightened norms for registration of private vehicles and their movement on the route.

Militants had also targeted the yatra 15 years ago, when they opened fire on a pilgrims' camp in Nunwan, near Pahalgam in August, 2002.

Security officials concur that militants usually do not target yatris or other tourists because it hurts Kashmir's local economy, which may turn the local population against them. But there have been instances, though few and far between, which necessitate heightened security arrangements. "After 7.30pm, yatris need to be in the designated camps or if required they will be put up at the nearby camps of security forces," said a South Kashmir-based security official who is involved in the security arrangements for yatra.

The government has also decided to install radio frequency identification (RFID) tags in the vehicles that will carry yatris in order to track their movement. The CRPF is doing a test run this year in this regard.

The security officials are particularly worried that as there has been a halt on operations against militants in the Valley this year, their job has become difficult.

"If not extended, the halt on operations will remain in force till Eid, which is likely to fall on June 17, and yatra is starting on June 28. Therefore, we have only a window of 11 days to check the movement of militants. We keep on getting intelligence on movement of militants since the halt has been announced but we can't launch operations against them. If given a chance we would like to launch operations against militants during the 11-day window in order to ensure better security for yatra," said a Srinagar-based security official.