

J&K separatist leaders held as protest shuts down Valley

Detentions have triggered fears that the Centre is preparing for a crackdown

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
SRINAGAR/NEW DELHI

The Kashmir Valley was shut down on Thursday by the separatists' Joint Resistance Leadership (JRL) to protest against the assassination of senior journalist Shujaat Bukhari, even as the police detained several separatist leaders early in the day.

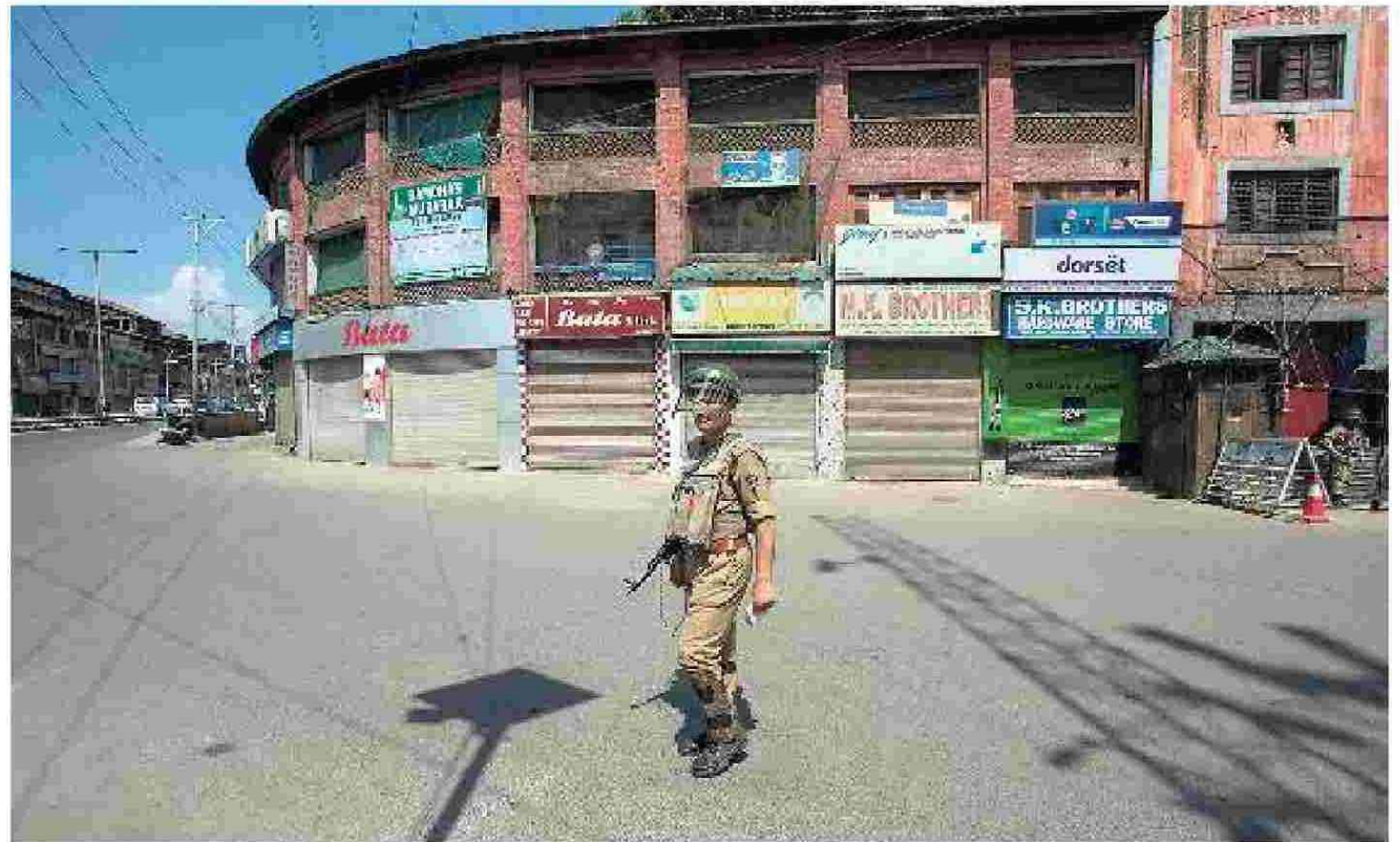
The detentions came amid concerns in several quarters that the Centre was preparing the State administration to carry out an aggressive crackdown in the Valley. Thursday began with the police detaining separatist leaders Syed Ali Shah Geelani, Mirwaiz Omar Farooq, Yasin Malik and others to prevent the JRL from holding its march and general strike against the killing.

While Mr. Malik was detained from his Maisuma residence after the Fajr prayers and taken to a police station, Mr. Geelani, Mirwaiz and Mohammad Ashraf Sehrai were put under house arrest.

'Political vendetta'

"This is nothing but political vendetta. The Hurriyat strongly protest the resumption of cordon and search operations," said the Mirwaiz.

Governor N.N. Vohra called a meeting of the leaders of all political parties, in-



Life halted: A CRPF soldier patrolling the market in Srinagar on Thursday. ■ NISSAR AHMAD

cluding the State units of the national parties, on Friday evening "to discuss the situation in the State."

BJP national vice-president Avinash Rai Khanna called on Mr. Vohra and discussed "steps required for promoting the welfare of the people in all the three regions."

Many political appointees in the previous PDP-BJP dispensation, including Advocate-General Jehangeer Ganai, resigned from their posts on Thursday.

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J&K separatist leaders detained

A day after the Central government appointed two key officials involved in anti-naxal operations – Chhattisgarh Additional Chief Secretary (Home) B.V.R. Subrahmanyam and retired IPS officer K. Vijay Kumar who was until recently adviser in the Home Ministry – Mr. Vohra said his priority would be to restore peace and tranquillity on the streets of Kashmir, admitting that the youth of Kashmir are annoyed.

However, many within the security establishment believe that the new appointments in J&K are clear indications of a tougher, more security-oriented approach. They warn that the present localised militancy could produce an unexpected backlash.

“We have seen a significant change in the local responses. We have had families celebrating killed militants, including a moth-

er firing in the air to celebrate her son’s death. To me the mood is quite like that of the early 90s,” warned a veteran Kashmir observer within the system. He pointed out that for each local youth killed, more would join the militant ranks.

‘131 militants are locals’

“We are no more dealing with anonymous foreign terrorists. We are dealing with local boys,” he said. Of the 144 active militants in South Kashmir, 131 are locals, according to official data. Only 13 are foreigners. And between January 1 and May 31, almost 90 locals have taken up arms.

Several sources in the security establishment say they are expecting a massive jump in violence. “Unless the Centre changes the present tactics, the Valley will go up in flames,” a recently retired intelligence officer warned.