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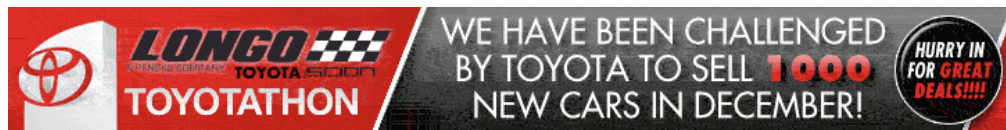
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Nearly 2,600 bodies found in unmarked, mass graves in Indian Kashmir, rights group says

AIJAZ HUSSAIN
Associated Press Writer
December 2, 2009 | 8:24 a.m.

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SRINAGAR, India (AP) — Nearly 2,600 bodies have been discovered in single unmarked and mass graves throughout mountainous Indian Kashmir, human rights activists said Wednesday, alleging some of the dead were likely innocent people killed by security forces.

More than a dozen Kashmiri rebel groups have been fighting for independence from India or a union with predominantly Muslim Pakistan since 1989. Rights groups say there have been more than 8,000 disappearances since the rebellion began.

Researchers from the International People's Tribunal on Human Rights and Justice, an Indian Kashmir-based rights group, said they found the graves in 55 villages during a three-year survey that concluded last month.

In a report titled "Buried Evidence" released Wednesday, the group documented 2,373 "unmarked and mass graves" containing nearly 2,600 bodies. It said 177 of the graves contained more than one body.

"We're not saying who is in each grave. But we're saying these are unnamed graves and its imperative to investigate the issue by an independent international body," said Angna Chatterji, one of the group's members.

The report also said it found evidence of 47 civilians being killed by security forces, who later claimed they were militants. Human rights workers have complained for years that innocent people have disappeared and been killed by government forces in staged gunbattles.

About 68,000 people, mostly civilians, have died in the 20-year conflict.

Ali Mohammed Sagar, Indian-Kashmir's law and parliamentary affairs minister, said Wednesday the government would respond to the report after reading it.

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Indian authorities have dismissed widespread allegations of human rights abuses by the army, paramilitary and police in the region.

Officials have said in the past that many militants have been killed in fighting with security forces and bodies are often buried in unmarked graves.

The government also says most of those who have disappeared are young Kashmiris who crossed into neighboring Pakistani-controlled Kashmir for weapons training.

Anti-India sentiment runs deep in Kashmir, a mostly Muslim region divided between majority-Hindu India and Pakistan, but claimed by both in its entirety.

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