Act, which critics say provides legal cover for the Indian army's abuses in the state.

Kashmir's 17-year insurgency has led to some 40,000 deaths by the army's count, and more than 100,000 by that of its opponents. But violence has declined sharply (see chart) and the idea of troop reduction has taken hold. General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's president, is no less keen on it than Kashmir's politicians.

Mr Sayeed, a savvy political veteran, presented his ultimatum first to Congress's Ghulam Nabi Azad, the chief minister. In early March he followed up with a similar missive to Manmohan Singh, India's prime minister. But Mr Singh, like Mr Azad and A.K. Antony, the defence minister, categorically rejected the demand, insisting that troop levels would not be reduced until insurgent violence had been eradicated. Prolonged and intense negotiations in Delhi ensued. Then on March 30th Mr Singh executed a deift volte-face.

The Congress party's initial reluctance to agree to Mr Sayeed's demand was understandable. State elections are due later this year, at which the PDP will doubtless claim the credit if there is any troop reduction. And elections in Indian Kashmir are becoming fairer. The most recent, in 2002, were seen as the cleanest yet, though a separatist boycott led to a low turnout, especially in the Kashmir Valley, the territory at the heart of the dispute. Since the separatists might one day contest elections with them, Kashmir's mainstream parties are stealing some of their policies.

But if caving in to Mr Sayeed looked unappealing to Congress, bringing down the governing coalition in the state by rejecting his demand for demilitarisation may have seemed worse. And whatever the electoral calculation, there is a strong case to be made for the idea. A phased reduction of troops dovetails with other confidence-building measures in Kashmir, such as the reopening in 2005 of a bus route from Srinagar to Muzaffarabad, capital of Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. Moreover, the latest official report estimates that only between 3,000 and 1,200 militants are still operating in Indian-administered Kashmir.

For all these reasons, Mr Singh's government felt the need to show flexibility. It has therefore set up three committees: one to look into troop redeployment, another to consider repealing the Special Powers Act and a third to review the findings of the first two. Conspicuously absent are a commitment to withdrawing troops and any timetable either for the completion of the reports or of a decision. Separatists dismissed it all as meaningless. Congress may feel it has shown goodwill without having had to give anything substantial away. Yet.

China

I'd rather be a hammer

Than a nail household. It gets clobbered in the end

In China, people who refuse to allow their homes to be demolished by developers are called "nail households". Most end up being chased away by the developers' thugs or forcibly removed by police. But in recent weeks determined resistance by a couple in the south-western city of Chongqing turned a struggle for private-property rights into a cause célèbre. They have now reached an agreement with the developers. But the debate will simmer on.

On April 2nd, a bulldozer demolished the two-storey hotpot restaurant that had also once been home to Yang Wu and his wife Wu Ping. Pictures such as the one above had acquired iconic status in China. On websites and in some of the country's more daring newspapers, they symbolised rare defiance by ordinary citizens in the face of the government-orchestrated onslaught of China's relentless urban redesign.

As a condition of moving out, the couple had demanded a property in the high-rise residential and commercial complex planned for the site. The developers, they said, were offering money—and not enough. After more than two years of wrangling, an agreement was reached this week, giving the couple property and cash worth more in total than their old house. Many in China would see this as victory. Despite laws requiring fair compensation, people forced to make way for construction projects often receive less than their properties are worth.

The couple's fight caught the Chinese media's attention just as the country's legislature was debating a new law aimed at protecting private-property rights. The law was adopted on March 16th and will come into effect on October 1st. The government's handling of the case was widely portrayed as a crucial test of the new law's effectiveness. The law is vague on compensation as well as on many other issues, but officials hope it will be a reassurance to the country's fast-growing middle class.

Debate over the case has strayed beyond property-related issues. A slogan displayed by the couple on their house hinted at wider concerns. "The state respects and preserves human rights," it said, citing a 2004 constitutional amendment ignored, in the couple's view, by government-backed developers.

The press has questioned the government's right to cite ill-defined "public interest" as an excuse for knocking down homes. Some, however, have also pointed out that at least the house was allowed to stand while the dispute continued. That, at least, was progress.

Down from a bloody peak

Kashmir killings, '00-03

Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal

*To March 31st