PAKISTAN GIVES GEOLOGY CONFERENCE THE COLD SHOULDER

“Pakistan has pulled the plug on high-profile conference next week that would have brought together scientists from India and Pakistan in a session designed to set aside hostilities and forge a research plan for the high Himalayas. The blow has left organizers of the science-for-peace event reeling. The cancellation “is completely unexpected and unwarranted”, says co-organizer Jack Shroder, a geologist at the University of Nebraska, Omaha.

The joint project was to focus on the Karakoram range of the Himalayan mountains of northern Kashmir, a high-altitude graveyard for soldiers from the Indian and Pakistani armies, who in reality are far more likely to die from exposure and accidents than enemy fire. Topping the agenda of the conference, funded in part by a $70,000 grant from the U.S. National Science Foundation and scheduled for 29 to 31 May, was a discussion of how to turn one iconic battleground, the 6100 metre high Siachen Glacier, into a science peace park. The first step would require that the two countries strike an accord and withdraw their troops. More than 100 scientists from eight countries had registered for the conference, sponsored by Pakistan’s Higher Education Commission (HEC).” — Pallava Bagla

ACROSS A POLITICAL DIVIDE, RESEARCHERS CONVERGE ON HIMALAYAN PLAIN

“Dehra Dun, India — A few dozen geoscientists met here in the foothills of the Himalayas last week to lay the groundwork for a bold initiative that would bring researchers from India and Pakistan together on joint projects in Kashmir. But there was a glaring hitch: Their Pakistani colleagues were on the other side of the border.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. After months of delicate planning, scientists had been set to gather in Islamabad at the end of May to hammer out a research plan for the western Himalayas, in particular the Karakoram Mountains. “There can’t be a better natural earth science laboratory than the high Himalayas”, says john “jack” H. Shroder, a geoscientist at the University of Nebraska, Omaha, and coorganizer of the meeting, funded in part by the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF). A centerpiece was to have been a discussion of a “science peace park” centered on the Siachen Glacier, a high-altitude graveyard for troops on the disputed border.

At the last minute, however, the Pakistan government withdrew its support for the meeting, citing security concerns (Science, 26 May, p.1117). The cancellation appeared to be collateral damage from the glacial pace of India-Pakistan talks on Siachen demilitarization, says Harry Barnes, a former U.S. ambassador to India who is advising NSF on the initiative.

Event organizers regrouped as best they could. On 31 May, 35 Pakistani and six U.S. scientists met in Islamabad to cobble together a research manifesto for the western Himalayas. A similar wish list was produced in Dehra Dun by a few dozen Indian scientists and colleagues from Canada and the United States. Neither meeting had local government support; Pakistan denied visas to Indian scientists, whereas Dehra Dun organizers say that time was too short after the May debacle to seek visas for Pakistani counterparts.

A top priority of all sides is to better understand Himalayan geodynamics. Accentuating the need for such studies is the earthquake that struck Kashmir on 8 October 2005, killing more than 100,000 people. The magnitude-7.6 quake “was a wake-up call . . . that temblors do not respect national boundaries”, says Shroder. One nasty surprise was that the quake’s epicenter—the Muzaffarabad fault—was not known to be active, he says.

Researchers called for the installation of a seismic network to better map tectonic activity in the western Himalayas. That would require unprecedented cooperation between Indian and Pakistani security forces, says Michael P. Bishop, a geoscientist at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. Researchers also hope to undertake active seismic profiling, in which explosives are detonated in deep holes. The vibrations reveal rock composition and fault structure-vital to refining maps of seismic risk. Mary Leech, a geologist at San Francisco State University in California, has tried to