ISLAMABAD, Pakistan -- Pakistan is intensifying a crackdown on militant groups that operate in the disputed region of Kashmir as the country tries to avert armed conflict with India over a Dec. 13 attack on India's parliament building in New Delhi.

Members of militant groups operating in the Pakistan-controlled part of Kashmir said Pakistani intelligence operatives are monitoring their movements closely. Lashkar-e-Taiba, an Islamic group that has been declared a terrorist organization by India and the U.S., closed its office in Pakistan's Punjab province Tuesday, one day after announcing its leader, a Pakistani, would step down in favor of a Kashmiri. And Pakistan's government radio Tuesday announced the arrest of the leader of another group targeted by India, Jaish-e-Mohammed.

Pakistan officials aren't explicitly linking these actions to the New Delhi attack. The Jaish-e-Mohammed leader, an Islamic cleric named Maulana Masood Azhar, was cited by Punjab authorities for making provocative speeches against the Pakistan government, according to the government radio report. The two groups, which both denied responsibility for the Dec. 13 attack, are likely to continue operating in both India-controlled and Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.

It is unclear whether Pakistan's actions will be enough to satisfy India, which has demanded the operations of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed be shut down. On Friday, India recalled its envoy to Pakistan and cut bus and rail links between the countries; on Monday, it expelled a Pakistan diplomat it accused of attempting to obtain classified information.

Still, by moving against the militant groups' Punjab offices, Pakistan at least reduces the military risks if India decides to act on its own. Military analysts believe there is a real threat that India could launch airstrikes in the Kashmir region to target the training bases of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed. That would be provocative enough, but any Indian move on Punjab would be even more incendiary.

Tuesday, the Indian army ordered residents in border villages to evacuate and the air force moved more assets to the frontier, the Associated Press reported. Indian defense officials said they were responding to a massive troop buildup on the other side of the border and the cease-fire line that divides the disputed Kashmir province between India and Pakistan. Indian and Pakistani troops have been exchanging heavy fire along the border in recent days, resulting in several deaths.

More than a dozen Muslim guerrilla groups are fighting to merge the Indian part of Kashmir to attain either the region's merger with Islamic Pakistan or its independence. Pakistan's official position is that it provides only moral and diplomatic support to Kashmiri "freedom fighters."
Some analysts believe President Pervez Musharraf was moving toward a broader crackdown on militant Islamic groups before the Dec. 13 attack. In August, the government had begun a push to disarm militant groups, though it wasn't clear whether that would extend to Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. The government had asked groups to surrender weapons and was keeping some religious party leaders under detention months after they challenged the government's support for the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

Tuesday, Punjab police sought to arrest Mr. Azhar of Jaish-e-Mohammed at his home in Bahawalpur. The cleric was released from a prison in Indian-controlled Kashmir in December 1999 in an exchange for passengers by the hijackers of an Indian plane taken to Afghanistan. A spokesman for the group last night confirmed the police were at Mr. Azhar's house, but said the cleric wasn't at home and suggested that he may avoid arrest.

Since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in the U.S., Pakistan has also sought to restrict Kashmir militant groups from collecting donations inside Pakistan. "There was much hue and cry" from the groups, says Ghulam Mohammed Safi, a leader of the Hurriyat Conference, an umbrella group of Kashmir parties. But "after the episode in New Delhi, I think there is some kind of stern action from the Pakistani side." He added that "we want our movement to be an indigenous movement."

But Gen. Musharraf faces a further difficulty, which is that India's vocal demands make it hard for him to crack down on extremist groups. "Everything India does creates a reaction from the public," said Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, president of the Islamabad Policy Research Institute.

Indeed, by feeding conspiracy theories about India hatching the Parliament plot itself, Pakistan officials have already made it difficult for the public to accept the idea of Pakistani involvement, even if India does supply proof. Asked about the Parliament attack, Mehmood Ali, a federal minister without portfolio, said, "These are all manufactured things."

President Musharraf, who returned Monday from a trip to China, is expected to meet with religious, political and military leaders in coming days, just as he did in September before announcing Pakistan's support for the U.S. bombing in Afghanistan.

In a televised speech Tuesday during a ceremony in Karachi to mark the anniversary of the birth of Pakistan's founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, President Musharraf avoided direct mention of the crisis with India, but repeated Jinnah's comment that India should abandon its "superiority complex." He also criticized "bigoted extremists" and said, "We, the vast, silent majority must vow not to be passive, voiceless onlookers to our internal destruction."

Saeed Azhar of Dow Jones Newswires in Karachi contributed to this report.