

Defence: India's Troubled Equations

Even as the Defence Ministry states that it has initiated much-needed reforms in the defence sector, differences between the civilian authorities and the men in uniform persist. **John Cherian** in New Delhi writes

THE image of India's armed forces has taken a beating because of unseemly happenings over the past year. The unexpected developments in the Indian Air Force (IAF) after the Pay Commission awards were announced were followed by wranglings over senior postings in the Indian Army and Navy. However, on the positive side, the armed forces carried out one of their biggest military exercises in the western desert in November and December.

When George Fernandes took over as Defence Minister, there were expectations that he would initiate major reforms in the armed forces. However, after initially giving the impression that he would be a "hands-on" Defence Minister, he became the pointman in the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Government's efforts to survive in office. The punishing schedule he has been following, most of it devoted to political fire-fighting, obviously has not left him with much time to run the Ministry of Defence (MoD). The complaint against his immediate predecessor, Mulayam Singh Yadav, was that he was more preoccupied with Uttar Pradesh and national politics than with the running of the Ministry.)

However, according to a statement released in the third week of December, the Defence Ministry has initiated the much-needed reforms in the defence sector. The statement said that Pokhran-II "marked a new chapter, taking India into the select group of nuclear weapon states", while the creation of the National Security Council (NSC) was indicative of the "priority" attached by the Government to "issues of national security".

One of the first acts of the Defence Minister after taking office was to revive the Defence Minister's Committee after a gap of more than 20 years, the statement said. Chaired by the Minister, the Committee, consisting of the three service chiefs, meets once a month. According to the Defence Ministry, this has paved the way for quick decision-making and enabled the service chiefs to take part in the decision-making process more effectively. It went on to say that after Fernandes took over, the weekly meetings between the service chiefs and senior officials in the Government have been regularised. These meetings are

meant to take a broad overview of national security.

Addressing the combined conference of armed force commanders on October 26, Fernandes said that the nature of modern weapon systems was "increasingly transcending single service boundaries" and that "increasingly, the fighting capabilities of the future will use the assets of the three services under integrated direction and command". Besides, he said that the "leading powers" had already introduced these changes. He said that although there was an urgent need for a national defence review, it would not be completed in a hurry and that it would be a "long-term effort". He wanted the armed forces to set up a rapid reaction force that would be able to reach any corner if a threat arises". He said that such a force would have to be a "service one".

Defence analyst K Subrahmanyam is of the opinion that there is an urgent need to introduce the reforms. He said that in other countries reforms were introduced every five years. According to him, powers should be devolved to theatre commanders. If this is done, the decision-making process will be an integrated one rather than the current single-point process emanating from the chiefs. If operational responsibilities were devolved, the service chiefs would be able to spend more time on long-term defence planning, said Subrahmanyam. (All these recommendations were made by the Arun Singh Committee, whose report was released 13 years ago.)

MEANWHILE, George Fernandes' penchant for playing to the gallery came to the fore when he ordered two middle-level bureaucrats to be transferred to the Siachen region for a couple of months as punishment. The punishment was ostensibly for a delay they caused in clearing files relating to the purchase of urgently needed snowmobiles for the Siachen region. This decision, which came soon after he assumed office, was praised by the men in uniform. However, the honeymoon between them and the Ministry did not last long as Air Force chief S K Sareen got dragged into unseemly controversies. There were reports that the Home Ministry was keeping a tab on him. Allegations, including receiving kickbacks in the Su-30 deal with Russia, were bandied about. The three ser-

vice chiefs even met the Prime Minister together to protest against the surveillance reportedly instituted by the Intelligence Bureau on the Air Force chief.

Shortly afterwards came the spectacle of a large number of senior officers going to court on being allegedly overlooked for key appointments. In December, the Delhi High Court upheld the contention of Lt. Gen. Raj Kadyan, who said that injustice had been done to him by superseding him in the selection for the post of General Officer Commanding-in-Chief (GOC-in-C) of the Eastern Command. The court rejected the Government's view that the present incumbent, Lt. Gen. H R S Kalkat, was appointed on merit. The state has appealed against this ruling to the Supreme Court.

Another high-profile case

the judiciary is handling is that of Air Marshal P K Ghosh. A Division Bench has ruled that officials of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) had misled the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC) and promoted Air Vice-Marshal S. Raghavan after falsely claiming that the court had ordered the appointment. Raghavan's appointment was regularised by the ACC on May 30. The March 23 court ruling in favour of Ghosh was not intimated to the ACC. Defence Secretary Ajit Kumar has been served with a notice of criminal contempt in this regard.

Sareen, who retired recently as Air Force chief, and the MoD were at loggerheads over the assessment of Air Marshal S. Krishnaswamy. Sareen is alleged to have made some adverse remarks in the confidential report, which were removed by the MoD. Krishnaswamy is expected to be a front-runner for the top job in the IAF in a few years' time.

However, it is the imbroglio involving the Navy chief that has grabbed the nation's attention. The issue is threatening to snowball into a major controversy with serious implications for both the civilian and defence establishments. Navy chief Vishnu Bhagwat refused to accept the ACC's decision to designate Vice-Admiral Harinder Singh, Fortress Commander, the Andamans, as Deputy Chief of Naval Staff (Operations). The ACC had nominated Harinder Singh for the key post despite being fully aware that the officer had, in a "redressal of grievance" petition in March 1998, made highly

personalised and potentially libellous charges against the Navy chief. One of the charges was that the Navy chief's wife, Nilofer Bhagwat, was "a half Muslim, card-carrying member of the Communist party". The MoD had even issued a show-cause notice to Harinder Singh, but it was withdrawn after he tendered an apology to the Ministry. (Harinder Singh, however, did not apologise to his Navy chief.)

An angry Bhagwat filed a contempt petition against Harinder Singh and charged Defence Secretary Ajit Kumar with collusion. The Calcutta High Court rejected the petition, and the MoD went ahead and forwarded to the ACC Harinder Singh's name for the post of Deputy Chief of Naval Staff (Operations). This was done despite the fact that Harinder Singh's name was rejected by all the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chiefs and the Vice-Chief of the Naval Staff. However, officials in the Defence Ministry claim that the ACC had been informed about the complexity of the case. After the ACC approved Harinder Singh's appointment, naval headquarters refused to implement the MoD's order claiming that it was violative of the Navy Act of 1957 which states that all appointments above the rank of Captain "shall be made by the Government on the recommendations of the Chief of the Naval Staff". This has been interpreted as a direct challenge to the civilian authority. Senior civil servants say that if the Navy is allowed to get away with this, the Army and the IAF too will begin to flex their muscles since the Army Act and Air Force Act also have similar provisions.

A senior officer now serving in the Navy said that the current imbroglio in the Navy could not be classified strictly as "black or white". According to him, some fundamental questions have been raised, which, if unresolved, could shake the edifice of the country's democratic foundation.

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