

# Camping in Bangladesh

MUMTAZ IQBAL

UNLIKE Nepal, travel guides like The Lonely Planet do not have much to say about camping or hiking in Bangladesh. Reason: there isn't much of either.

So when Delhi reminds Dhaka of up to 195 (!) camps in Bangladesh, it is not talking of our tourism potential, but about insurgents from the Seven Sisters (not the oil companies but NE India's seven states) taking sanctuary when Indian Army makes life hot for them.

Obviously, these insurgents don't read The Lonely Planet. Or they are hardy backpackers willing to rough it out. Since these camps chill Indo-Bangladesh harmony, it's worth an examination. Let's begin by reviewing insurgent organisations.

## Orgy of organisations

The first thing that strikes one is their sheer number: globalsecurity.org records the unbelievable figure of 104 militant organisations, tabled below under STATE, ORG (mainstream), %, POP (MILL), ORG/POP (MILL):

ARUNACHAL, 3 (3), 31, 1, 1/0.36; ASSAM, 39(5), 38, 26.6, 1/0.69; MANIPUR, 37(7), 35, 2.2, 1/0.60; MEGHALAYA, 3(2), 3, 2.4, 1/0.80; MIZORAM, 4(1), 4, 0.89, 1/0.22; NAGALAND, 3(2), 3, 2.0, 1/0.67; TRIPURA, 15(2), 14, 3.2, 1/0.21 = 104 (22), 100, 35.99, 1/0.35.

Assam, Manipur and Tripura account for 87%. Oddly enough, Nagaland, which has seen the earliest (1947), thorniest and most enduring insurgency, accounts for only three. About 1/5th (22) are major players. The NE has a ratio of one insurgent organisation per 0.35 million people, probably a world record. Merits inclusion in Guinness?

These figures suggest the NE breed insurgent organisations like rabbits that split like amoeba. It's likely most of them, like the 100 or so Bangladesh political parties, are Maruti-organisations whose membership would snugly fit inside that car. Some are RAW sustained, just like the US Communist Party in 1950s survived on FBI infiltrators' dues!

If the adage there's safety in numbers is true, the fact there are 22 major organisations vying for popular support should comfort, not dismay, Indian counter-insurgency warriors.

This means considerable latitude to pursue divide and rule policies (stick) in tandem with co-optation (talking softly) to weaken or neutralise insurgents. This is what Delhi's done over the years with mixed results and some success e.g. Mizoram.

## Acronyms galore

Another striking thing is the 104 organisations' acronyms read like a UN directory. Most use some or all of the following words in their somewhat stilted martial title: Commando; Force; Front; Liberation; National; Peoples; Revolutionary; United; Volunteer, with National, Liberation and Front being the most common.

Organisations with three letter acronyms total 48; with four, 44; with five, 11 and with six, one. The last one is ostentatiously titled PREPAK (Peoples Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak), mnemonically harmo-



nious but sounds like a packaging ad!

The most comprehensive name leaving nothing to chance is MULTA (Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam, not be confused with UMFLA (United Muslim Liberation Front of Assam).

Tiger forces are more ubiquitous (eight entities) than the fiery dragon and poisonous cobra (one each). In Assam, there is one Hindu entity compared to 13 Muslim ones. Presumably this forms a basis for some of the Indian media's obsession with the unrealistic chimera of 'Brihottam' (Greater) Bangladesh!

**Chronicling the camps**

In 1964, about 300 Nagas (men, women and children) led by A.Z. Phizo sought shelter in East Pakistan to escape Indian army's operations. Reportedly, they were put in a camp deep in Madhupur jungle.

The camp comprising of a number of 'bashas' on stilts and separate living and training quarters,

including a chapel, occupied a reasonable area.

Using Madhupur facilities as a yardstick, a pertinent question is whether the Indians have described the contents of some or all of the so-called 195 camps and whether any one resembles remotely or approximately Madhupur. One doubts whether any description if provided comes close to the make-up of the 1964 project. Bangladesh denies aiding the insurgents. Elementary cost-benefit analysis lends credence to this view.

But this doesn't mean camps may not exist inside Bangladesh. For the very practical reason that the topography and terrain of the Bangladesh border astride Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura and Mizoram makes this possible without official knowledge.

But the logistics of such camps, in the absence of support by state or state-supported organisations, are likely to be makeshift, basic, primitive and rudimentary, geared more to enable the insurgents to

survive rather than bolster their martial skills and uplift morale.

Remoteness that facilitates evasion also limits the delivery and efficacy of support to these elements by any clandestine actors. Bangladesh's basic interests suggest that such actors, if any, and when identified, should be firmly persuaded to cease and desist.

The map coordinates of some of these camps given by Delhi to Dhaka appear to lack definitiveness. It's rumoured that one related to an army installation in Sylhet; another a Dhaka research organisation.

## The ISI connection

Delhi blames the ISI for the NE troubles. Given that Indo-Pak relations at the best of times are not easy, Islamabad probably wouldn't mind meddling in these muddy waters, and muddying it further.

Prussia was often described as an army with a state. While the ISI didn't quite reach that eminence, its halcyon days were under President Ziaul Huq when it was a state within a state while running the Afghan resistance as US surrogate.

But other than Kabul, ISI's record (and also of the IB) in handling insurgencies and strategic political assessments has been less than stellar. Operation Gibraltar was a fiasco (see The Way It Was-late Brig. (ret'd) Z.A.Khan, p154-56). ISI/IB forecast of the 1970 East Pakistan elections was off base. The Taliban project to seek "strategic depth" foundered after initial success. So did Kargil, where military intelligence had star billing.

Against this profile, therefore, it's doubtful if the ISI is to be feared as a NE bogeyman as much as Delhi claims it is. ISI's support of Seven Sisters insurgents probably amounts to nothing more than a pinprick to the Indian security forces.

If the Madhupur inputs in 1964, when conditions such as geographical contiguity were propitious for Pakistan, yielded meager pickings, not much more can be expected currently when Islamabad has to direct activities from afar. Nonetheless, it's a pinprick Delhi would love to see go away.

## Summing up

The NE insurgencies are a domestic product. Their root causes are historical alienation between tribals and mainlanders; economic grievances and blow-back against Indian counter-insurgency measures (e.g. Armed Forces Special Powers Act). The camps neither cause nor sustain the insurgencies. These would exist even if the camps (and ISI) vanished overnight.

So why does Delhi keep carping about camps? To hazard a guess, probably a combination of pique and frustration at the paucity of progress on basic issues like water, transit, gas and port that are important to the welfare of both countries, accentuated by growing unease at Bangladesh's unsatisfactory law and order situation.

The author is a freelancer

## Snippets

### US led worldwide weapons sales in 2003: US report

THE US led worldwide weapons sales in 2003, with sales totaling \$14.5 billion, or 56.7 percent of all arms agreements, up from \$13.6 billion in 2002. Russia was ranked second with arms sales of \$4.3 billion, or 16.8 percent of all global sales in 2003, compared with sales of \$5.9 billion in 2002. Germany came third with arms sales of \$1.4 billion in 2003, or 3.9 percent of global sales.

The report, "Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations," is published annually by the CRS that is part of the US Library of Congress.

Meanwhile, global arms sales in 2003 fell approximately 12 percent to \$25.6 billion compared with \$29.14 billion in 2002, the third consecutive year total arms sales have fallen.

India bought arms worth \$12.6 billion while Pakistan spent \$3.8 billion on arms purchases in 2003, according to a US government report.

### 'Nuke proliferation, terrorism biggest challenges for region'

NUCLEAR proliferation and terrorism are two of the biggest challenges to peace and stability in the Asia Pacific, India's army chief told a gathering of the region's top military officials recently.

"We are all looking for stability, peace and development but there are two issues that are really worrisome - nuclear proliferation and non-traditional warfare or terrorism," Gen. N.C. Vij said in his opening address to a seminar hosted jointly by the Indian and US armies.

"Nuclear proliferation is far more easily tackled due to institutionalised measures that are followed strictly. But terrorism is acquiring far more worrisome dimensions.

"Terrorism is worrying all nations and is one kind of threat that has no fronts or rears, no friends or foes, no combatants and non-combatants," Vij told military officials from over 30 countries attending the seminar on "Regional Cooperation in a Changing Security Environment".

The joint hosting of the seminar by the India Army and the Pacific Command of the US Army reflects their rapidly growing military ties. Over the past few years, the armed forces of the two countries have carried out joint exercises to increase their capability to tackle terrorism and other emerging threats.

"It is extremely important for us to cooperate with India because we learnt much from the vast experience of the Indian Army."

In the past two years, the armies of the two countries have trained for joint operations in areas ranging from the jungles of the northeast to the frozen deserts of Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir.

### India, Israel to develop hi-tech defence hardware

INDIA will soon launch programmes with Israel and the US to develop nano-materials and hi-tech components needed for electronic warfare systems, a top defence scientist said in Delhi recently.

V.K. Aatre, the outgoing chief of the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), said India had decided to launch joint programmes with Israel in the field of electronic warfare, where both countries were on an equal footing.

"They (Israel) are very strong in sensors and packaging. We would like to work on fibre-optic gyros and micro-electromechanical systems," Aatre told reporters shortly before he retired as DRDO chief.

Referring to cooperation with the US in defence research, he said the two sides had done some work on life sciences and would launch joint programmes on developing nano-technology and nano-materials.

Source: Indo-Asian News Service

## DATELINE KASHMIR

# Between heaven and hell

BRIG GEN JAHANGIR KABIR, *ndc, psc (ret'd)*

THE latest Indo-Pak ministerial level meeting has actually landed on the well-known snag with a usual tone of brisk optimism at the end. The Indian foreign Minister Natwar Singh, a veteran of many dialogues, and Foreign Minister of Pakistan Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri a veteran politician of many shades, have met like boxers with no concession in mind. The Indian delegation has however lodged a new complaint, "Violation of Rhetoric Restraint Regime"- a glaring example of how silly the talk could go. And the grand finale is, no progress but 'no progress dialogue regime' will continue.

Earlier at the secretary level parley, India found a new coinage when Indian Prime Minister Monmohan Singh with his usual affable smile used the word 'composite' dialogue- a word preferred by metallurgy. Since the first round of war in 1948, fighting and endless dialogues have done little but add all kinds of colorful wrappers to the core issue of discord.

Having fought three wars and many skirmishes, neither of the contending parties is in a position to escalate the complex Kashmir problem any farther at the moment. Not to be misunderstood however, they neither lack the intention nor the means, but compulsions elsewhere hold them back for a while. It would be suicidal for any government in Pakistan unwilling to 'fight' for Kashmir; equally so for anybody in Delhi to 'concede' an inch of Kashmir for peace. War is on since 1947. But compulsions restrain, like boxers in the ring, not to engage in punching and counterpunching all the time but shadowing eyeball to eyeball. It is an endless boxing, shadow or real with no knockout or result in sight.

In case of an all-out conventional war, although weighed in favor of India, it does not promise of a quick and decisive result. In a long drawn war India may win by mathematical calculations. But there are too many unforeseen national, international and military factors in a war affecting the nerves of warring nations. In case of another war, India with her conventional advantage may wish to go for a decisive result but will certainly be held back from overkill as was done in 71 in the western sector which is now Pakistan. International forces will not allow India a free run on Pakistan.

Besides, even if doomed in a conventional war, Pakistan is not yet exhausted, for 'she did not eat grass to produce atom-bombs' (late Bhutto) and still refining the technology and delivery system, not to hug onto them facing a battlefield defeat. General Aslam Beg once said, Pakistan will certainly resort to nuclear option to avert a battlefield defeat. When scholars like Shireen Mazari represent the barometer of overcharged masses, nuclear duel in a future war between India and Pakistan is not shadow boxing but a real possibility. With her strong advocacy for nuclear bomb, Shireen Mazari had instantly become the most masculine figure in Pakistan.

In case of nuclear exchange also, Pakistan could be knocked out by cold calculations. But before that can happen, it is still capable of inflicting damage to India beyond recognition. These are arithmetical calculations of weight and impact theory propounded by the strategists and experts. In case of nuclear exchange much depend on who shoots first and real calculations can come only from after-event wisdom. The stake of punishing Pakistan is simply too high for their indulgence in Kashmir. If Pakistan lose another war she will be left with nothing much. That's what makes Shireen Mazari and many others in Pakistan hell



"Sunset in Kashmir valley" - Lord Badenpowell

bent on nuclear option.

But nuclear option is restraining India less than it is retarding Pakistan to point of blackmail. So-called Islamic bomb has earned Pakistan more enemies than friends. It makes Pakistan vulnerable to pre-emptive strike from many quarters. We have seen that kind of pre-emptive action in Saddam's Iraq. The pressure on Pakistan to roll back its nuclear option has not been permanently halted but temporarily suspended due to its participation in the war against terrorism. The way Dr. Abdul Qadir, the father of nuclear Pakistan was exposed as guilty of nuclear proliferation to rogue regimes; I suspect the case will come forward at a chosen time to prove Pakistan as unreliable nuclear source. In the changed world order, Pakistan may have to calculate 'vulnerability-security perception' of nuclear option one more time.

The happiest people on the continuing dialogue between the archrivals are the busy looking diplomats. At the end of parley they usually carry a bagful of bluffs for the people and press, hungry for news, views and success. In spite of hot and cold occasionally blown with cultivated shrewdness for public consumption it has been the game plan of both the countries, suspended only intermittently during wars and skirmishes fought fiercely by foolhardy soldiers.

After so much of blood and tears shed for last half a century does Kashmir really have a solution to the satisfaction of both the contenders? To some, Kashmir is terror, which has taken hostage a billion plus people in India, and another 160 million in Pakistan, tormenting and torturing at will. The only practical solution is to ignore it for an infinite period so that all those who are fighting and earning their bread on 'Kashmir Tragedy' are gone by nature's way. A new generation who will be more practical will have a cost effective approach towards Kashmir.

There must be a genuine research today as to how many costly billions have been wasted by both the countries on Kashmir during last half a century that could have done miracles to the people still struggling for a reasonable living. It has made people unduly sentimental, proliferated atomic madness and violence. It is difficult to rationalize why both the countries have harnessed mass destructive capabilities while failing to provide basic education and health care to their peoples. It does not matter to military usurpers, even democracy in rage is obnoxiously vulgar.

Even if left alone, Kashmiris themselves are hardly able to solve the riddle. Hindu majority Jammu might like to join India. It is difficult to assess what majority Muslims in the valley would do. Many feel Muslims might opt for independence along with Pakistani held Kashmir. And nobody seems to know what Tibetan Buddhists would ask for in the remote Ladakh region. Kashmiris never really mattered. It was the Maharaja, facing a revolt of his subject, reluctantly acceded to India in 1947. Ever since, the battle is on; blood and tears of Kashmiris are flowing in the lakes.

Once known as Heaven on earth it is now a Hell.

The author is writer on defence matters

# Beslan and beyond

## Testing time for Putin

BRIG GEN M. SAKHAWAT HUSSAIN *ndc, psc (ret'd)*

OVER 1200 children and adults were taken hostage by heavily armed 'terrorists' on a mid-level school opening day in Beslan, a small city on western bank of river Terak, a common river flowing northeast through Chechnya which terminates on the Dagestan's shore of the strategically important Caspian Sea. It is believed that Terak River is commonly used by Chechen fighters for undetected movement, particularly within the Caucasus region. The nightmarish ordeal that Mr. Vladimir Putin faced in his second term of presidency was over by 3 September 2004, with Russian Special Forces attack on the hostage taker in Beslan, North Ossetia, with an enormous cost of human life.

For long, the small community of Ingush Muslims within Ossetian orthodox Christian community had been fighting over historical injustices made by Stalin in 1942 when large portion of Ingush and Chechens were deported to other parts of Soviet Union on the pretext of collaborating with Nazi Germany, only to return in 1942 as destitutes. Since return, the Ingush community, in and outside Ingushetia, have been fighting to reestablish their claim over right to property that was taken over by the party workers and the local Orthodox Russian Christian community. The ongoing inter-ethnic conflict complicated with the breakup of Soviet Union in 1992 and with the subsequent breakup of Chechen-Ingush autonomous region. The ethnic conflict in Ingushetia turned into freedom struggle that influenced the social tension between two communities in neighboring North Ossetia.

The Beslan hostage crisis began when twenty-three heavily armed so-called terrorists reportedly seized the building where school congregation was about to conclude. The crisis lasted three days before tragic end that took almost 350 lives including children of all ages. The exact number still remains disputed. Initial 25 casualties were said to have been from accidental tripping of mine that the hostage-takers had laid around the gymnasium where 1200 hostage were huddled together. The accident followed storming of the building by Russians Special Forces. It was an ill-planned premature raid that is now confirmed to have triggered the sordid incident. It was a carnage that the Russian troops initiated in the process of negotiation at local level. The hostage-takers, including two women suspected to belong to Chechnya's 'black widows', were subsequently killed, rest of the hostages released. It was one of the costliest operations in terms of human lives. Though the hostage-takers were believed to have been a mixture of Chechen and Ingush Muslim separatists, Moscow claimed presence of Arab fighters among them in a bid to paint it as international terrorism. Till date Russian claims of foreign presence has not been proved, rather it is now reported that ten of the hostage-takers were identi-

fied as six Chechens and rest Ingush fighters. It seems that Moscow was trying to parry international criticism of worst human right abuses in the region by fantasizing the presence of foreign fighters among the Chechen 'freedom fighters'. Ever since the second Chechen offensive was launched in 1999, Russia has been downplaying the Chechen conflict, and, since 9/11 and US declaration of war against terror, Moscow went all out to prove the presence of foreign fighters in Grozny. The hostage takers had proposed negotiations through their nominated go-between. The initial demand was for release of Chechen fighters in Russian custody, which subsequently changed to Chechen freedom. None of the demands was acceptable to Russia. In fact Mr. Putin was not in favour of negotiation with 'terrorists' as he displayed in 2002 in Moscow theater siege.



Relatives of killed hostages cry at the destroyed school in Beslan

Considered to be 'new czar' of Russia, president Putin has maintained the inseparability of autonomous regions of Caucasus, a region vital for Russia's most required oil, natural gas and being the hub of oil pipelines flowing to the north and to Caspian Sea. Chechnya had been a vital region supplying oil for mainland Russia with one of the biggest refinery that the ex Soviet Union had. Decade-long insurgency in Chechnya had ruined the prospect of new exploration and the pipeline infrastructure that proved too costly for Russia's economic growth. Chechnya and Ingushetia have been fighting Russian troops for independence since 1992. Though in 1991 Ingushetia had left Chechen-Ingush autonomous federation that was formed in 1932, both claimed full independence within CIS, but Moscow refused to consider the 300 years old aspiration for Chechen-Ingush freedom.

Russia refused to grant independent status to these Muslim majority regions unlike other republics, mainly for strategic considerations. Apart from economic reasons Moscow did not want the influence of Islam in its backyard. The predominantly Muslim region of Chechnya and Ingushetia never integrated, neither with Czarist Russia nor with

Socialist Soviet Union. To break the collective resistance soon after Russian Revolution, North Caucasus was divided into ethnical lines. But Chechen revulsion for Soviet Union continued through out the twentieth century. Chechen rebels demand no less than full independence from Russia, so does Ingushetia. The demands have met with tough and brutal military repression by Moscow that went off the world focus after 9/11 when USA declared war against terror. Once reared by CIA, Chechen fighters were used against the Soviet Union. Current reports suggest a number of Chechen fighters had joined Osama bin Laden in his fight against 'western infidels'.

However, since 9/11 Chechen and Ingush fighters have been identified as terrorists and went off the western media focus for Russian support to USA for its war against terror. It is said that Chechen rebels have now resorted to suicide bombing, high profile hostage taking to attract world media attention to their lonely fight against the shadow of Czarist Russia. Since first Chechen invasion by Russian troops under Boris Yeltsin to crush revolt by Chechen president Dzhokhar Dudayav over 70,000 Chechens have died and another 3, 00,000 have fled Chechnya into the mountains or enclaves around Chechnya. Grozny, capital of Chechnya, in terms of Putin, appears to be a ruined ancient ghost city. Obscured from world's eye the worst kind of human rights abuse is reported against the Russian troops in Chechnya. Uninterrupted ethnic cleansing seems to continue unabated that motivated war widows to sacrifice their lives in for the Chechen fighters.

Moscow has been accusing the US and British governments for their ambivalent policy towards Chechen rebellion. Britain and EU had never approved Russian handling of Chechnya rather gave asylum to many Chechen and Ingush rebels. Yet neither EU nor Britain ever put pressure on Moscow to improve human right record. US need more cooperation from Russia in its global war against terror including Iraq. Apart from Russian support to American war on terror Russia's acquiescence is essentially needed for the occupation of Iraq. Important to note that since the Soviet breakup US companies have heavy investment in energy sector in central Asia and Caucasus region all around Caspian Sea. Chechnya and Ingushetia is considered an essential part of smooth transportation of Central Asian resources towards north and west to Black Sea. Instead of applying military power at the cost of Russia's social and economic growth Moscow may think of negotiated settlement.

The author is a military and strategic analyst.