

The way forward on Siachen



Sarah Abdul Wadood Khan

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Back Drop

The 1972 Shimla agreement demarcated boundaries between India and Pakistan but was totally ambiguous in designating a clear border in the high and uninhabited wilderness surrounding the Siachen Glacier. Indian interpretation was that Pakistan territory is until Saltoro ridge. Pakistan interpretation was their territory is until Karakoram pass. Due to this both India and Pakistan claim sovereignty over the entire Siachen region.

Many mountaineering expeditions have taken place between 1970s and 1980s on Siachen. They received permits from the Government of Pakistan to trek up to the Saltoro range. Government used to send a Liaison officer from the Pakistan Army with teams, which left India in discomfort so (One of the notable feature is that India doesn't have any ground links to Siachen) they also initiated an expedition of the similar sort.

In 1984, India launched a successful military operation and got controlled of the top most heights. By having the control of top most heights, Indian Army is in a tactical advantageous position. While Pakistani forces controlling "Gyoung La Pass" Indian access to K-2 and other surrounding peaks has been blocked effectively. Now, the situation is that Pakistanis cannot get up to the glacier, while the Indians cannot come down.

Many disputes took place between India and Pakistan since then but more soldiers have died in Siachen from harsh weather conditions than from combat. Both sides continue to deploy more and more forces.

India insists that Pakistan officially acknowledge India's higher positions in Siachen and mark them on a map before any withdrawal. Pakistan, which believes India started the war and occupied its territory, finds these demands humiliating and almost impossible for it to accept.

The Siachen's issue came into lime light again when One hundred and thirty-nine brave Pakistanis, 124 of whom were members of the Pakistani army received martyrdom after an avalanche crashed down on a battalion headquarters at Gyari near Skardu.

On that occasion Pakistan's Army chief has made a rare call for the demilitarization of the Siachen Glacier which received a guarded response from the India.

Since 1885 till today, there were 39 glacial surges in the area. The glacier is under stress due to rising temperature in the area. More catastrophes can hit if movement of military men doesn't stop.

This is not an issue which cannot be settled. Leadership from both the sides needs to sit and talk as how to do it.

Main Hurdle

Due to the past events, trust deficit has become the main hurdle in sorting out various issues between both the countries and Siachen is one of them.

The way Forward

- Each side should stop the blame game.
- Trust building measures should be adapted.
- That has been a norm to get dialogues hostage to one single issue .Pakistan emphasized in solving Kashmir issue first while India demanded to sort out terrorism before both the sides could meet on a table .Such unnecessary delays will serve no purpose to anyone.
- Pakistan should take a bold step by inviting the third party – United Nations or regional country (ies) to resolve this matter.
- Demilitarise the zone with the UN or regional country to act as the guarantor would be in the best interest of both the countries.
- Posting a UN peacekeeping force on both sides to keep both countries from moving forward to certain limits.
- Demilitarization should take place through **bilateral withdrawal** of the forces .There cannot be unilateral withdraw from any side .Pakistan thinks that since Indian army is holding the Saltoro ridge inside Pakistan. Unilateral withdraw can give open access to India to K2 , Karakorum highway, Gilgit Baltistan, Sakardu and land borders and road links with China which would go against Pakistan . In the similar way India reminds us of Kargil as to how Pakistan initiated the attack. Also it has reservations that leaving the high peaks would give open way to China to keep a check on India.

- Turn the whole region into Trans boundary Peace Park. A boundary around the area may however be maintained to prevent unauthorised border crossing. There are currently around 170 Trans boundary Parks in the World.
- If the issue doesn't reach to any solution then as a last resort Pakistan should take the matter to "International Court of Arbitration".

Conclusion

Ending this conflict would result in an ongoing Indo-Pak dialogue some momentum. It can pave way to an honest dialogue to Kashmir issue too. Besides the money spend there could be used for the welfare of the people. We can save many lives of our brave soldiers who are serving there unconditionally in severe conditions. This small start can begin a larger process. Endorsing what our Foreign Minister said that we are not going to be bogged down by an older mindset. We must move on towards development.

"We, the willing, are doing the impossible for the ungrateful. We have done so much, with so little, for so long, we are now qualified to do anything, with nothing."

These notes are from the diary of a soldier who served in Siachen -speaks well of how is it going with them. (Original quote by Mother Teresa.)