

SIACHEN PEACE PARK

A Proposal

By AAMIR ALI

The Siachen glacier, on the eastern edge of the Karakorams, is 77 km. long, 2-8 km. wide, the longest in the world outside the Polar regions. It is redolent of the Romance of Exploration: Moorcroft, Younghusband, the Workman-Bullocks, Dainelli, Neve, Longstaff, Visser, Khan Sahib Afraz Gul. An uninhabited area, it was given no attention in the negotiations between India and Pakistan in 1949 (Cease fire Line); 1965 (Tashkent Agreement); 1972 (Shimla Agreement and the Line of Control).

Then began the war of mountaineering expeditions. Pakistan authorised several expeditions since 1950 (access is much easier from the Pakistan side), but did not establish any permanent posts. Indian Army mountaineering expeditions went in 1978, 1980, 1981. In 1984, Pakistan authorised a Japanese expedition to the Rimo peaks via the Siachen, and sent soldiers to the area; India stopped this expedition and in April 1984, sent troops to establish and maintain control; there was severe fighting and positions have been more or less frozen since then.

Till 2003, the armies of India and Pakistan (several thousand troops) have faced each other in a surreal, undeclared war; the longest running conflict of our times in which regular armed forces are taking part. (Since 2003 there is a cease fire but armies are still stationed there on high altitudes.) The Indian Base Camp is at 12,000 ft with posts at up to 22,000 ft. Of the 3500 dead and 10,000 injured, only 3% have been due to enemy action; the remainder have been victims of the elements: cold of minus 50 degrees Centigrade; blizzards with winds up to 300 km. an hour; avalanches and crevasses; the mountaineers dreaded oedema. Soldiers have to be rotated as they cannot spend more than 30 days at high altitudes.

Everything has to be flown in by helicopter or airdropped: personnel, food, fuel, tents, equipment, ammunition, weapons. Artillery, such as the Bofors multi-barrelled rocket launchers, have to be dismantled and flown in, then reassembled. The rarefied atmosphere and winds make mockery of ballistic data. The Indian army now has the highest battleground, the highest cemetery, the highest helipad (19,000 ft.), the highest dropping zone (22,000 ft.) in the world. The cost of this operation is at least Rs. 5 crores a day. This is about 50 times higher than the costs to Pakistan, which has easier access by road, with much lower base camps (9000 ft.) and with posts at lower altitudes (up to 15,000 ft.). Though less expensive than India's operation, it is yet a heavy expenditure. For both countries, this is an intolerable drain. They are not rich countries, with a fifth of the world's population but a half of the world's poor.

Pollution

It is not easy to imagine the pollution caused by thousands of men living up there, with every item of necessity being flown in. Cans, drums, tetra packs of fruit juices, aluminium packaging: this can neither be burnt, nor destroyed nor taken back. Imagine the human waste. This amounts to over 1000 kgs. a day; it is packed in metal drums and dropped into crevasses - up to 4000 drums a year. This, together with hundreds of tons of garbage, will then be our legacy to future generations when the glacier finally reaches the end of its journey.

Heavy guns and equipment are flown in, but as a senior army officer remarked: Nothing will ever be flown back. The ibex are all gone. The wild roses - the area was famous for its wild roses; 'Sia' means rose in the Balti language - have been cut for tent pegs or other uses, or for decoration.

What Right Do We Have?

Do we have the right to destroy one of the Himalayas most majestic areas before leaving it to future generations?

Do we have the right to despoil the country without the leave of the local peoples?

Do we have the right to degrade the mountains which are the source of water for millions?

Do we have the right to turn the Abode of the Gods into a nightmare landscape?

The Siachen Peace Park

The costly - and some might say absurd - stand-off between two armies is not by any means accepted by everyone as inevitable. There have been many discussions, including several between the two countries, aimed at resolving this situation. Even in 1984 and 1985, immediately after the posting of troops, there were flag meetings between sector commanders. Since then there have been several meetings between senior officials - Foreign Secretaries, Defence Secretaries, senior military personnel - to find a way out of this eyeball to eyeball situation.

In 1989 there was an understanding to resolve the dispute 'based on redeployment of forces.....and to ensure durable peace in the Siachen area.'

In November 1992, it was reported that high level officials had come to an agreement that 'envisaged the mutual withdrawal of troops and the creation of "zones of complete disengagement"..... and the delineation of this area of 'peace and tranquillity'

Alas, mutual suspicion was too strong, and none of these agreements, if that's what they were, were carried out. Does this mean that this situation is eternal? While

there is certainly a deep desire on both sides to end this situation, no one is ready to trust the other side.

The ideal answer could be a Trans-frontier Park, serving as a buffer between the two countries, with firm guarantees that neither side can sneak in and occupy any part of the area.

Trans-frontier Parks

The concept of a trans-frontier park is not new; such parks have been established in all parts of the world over the last 70 years; in recent years there has been an 'explosion' of such parks, many of them linked to peace efforts. There are today some 160 such parks on the borders of 98 countries; a total of 406 protected areas and 112 international boundaries with at least one trans-frontier park. Several of them are specifically designated as Peace Parks, intended to provide a peaceful solution to a conflict or potential conflict, or to the rehabilitation of an area after a conflict..

In India, there is the Manas Wildlife Sanctuary on both sides of the India-Bhutan border, while suggestions have been made for Peace Parks on the frontiers with Nepal and Bhutan. India already has several National Parks in the Himalayan regions: the Great Himalayan, the Hemis, the Keibul Lamjao, the Khangchendzonga, the Kishtwar, the Bamdapha, the Nanda Devi, the Kokrek, the Rajaji, the Valley of Flowers, the Pin Valley. There are also some 25 Sanctuaries in the region.

In Pakistan, there is the Khunjerab National Park and the large Central Karakoram National Park, (now K2 National Park) which would be adjacent to any Siachen Peace Park. Once the principle of a Park is accepted, measures guaranteeing security to both India and Pakistan and ensuring the proper the management of the Siachen Peace Park would be worked out between the two countries. International institutions, with wide experience in trans-frontier parks, would be available and ready to provide technical help.

One purpose of trans-frontier parks is, of course, to allow animals free movement in their natural habitats without artificial barriers; yet another instance where animals can teach a lesson to humans.

The creation of the Siachen Peace Park would not only preserve a spectacular mountain region; it would defuse an armed stand-off, ease political tensions, facilitate further agreement between India and Pakistan, and represent a tremendous saving in resources. The ibex and the snow leopard would return, the roses would bloom again.