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A Siachen Peace Park?

We were staying in army bunkers at base camp on the Siachen glacier. In the next room I could hear my son, Nawang, then a young man of 20 years, talking with equally young lieutenants and captains of the Indian army. They were discussing their exploits on the glacier, the war and agitatedly talking about the friends being wounded and killed all around them. One well-meaning officer pointedly said to me as I entered the room to join the discussion: 'I am ready to fight for my country and defend the Siachen. But sir, I am young and I do not want my children and grandchildren sitting on this high, forlorn Saltoro ridge defending the Siachen glacier. Why can't we have some solution to this wretched problem?' Another young officer added: 'Look at the glacier, a pristine mountain area polluted almost beyond repair. It will take decades, if not a century to rejuvenate. Something must be done.' These dedicated officers of the Indian army left the seed of an idea in my mind. This world is a legacy for the young, an area like Siachen belongs to them. They were ready to guard it with their lives, they meant well. My son, excited at the prospect of defending his country alongside other officers, had worked hard and joined the army as a Gorkha Officer. Shortly thereafter he fell to a terrorist bullet in this bloody war in Kashmir. That seed of an idea became a *raison d'être* of my life. I began to work on a proposal for peace on the Siachen glacier.

Mountains have traditionally been a haven for people seeking peace and spiritual solace. Nowhere has this been more so than in the Himalaya. It is ironic then that it is in the Himalaya, or to be more exact in the Karakoram, that this bitter and deadly, heroic but absurd conflict is being fought. For 20 long years, the armed forces of India and Pakistan have fought for the control of the Saltoro ridge that guards the Siachen glacier towards its west. It is the highest battlefield in the world. India occupies the entire Siachen, but at a great price.

The glacier is rich in history. Sir Francis Younghusband first looked on it in 1887 followed by the intrepid Tom Longstaff who in 1910 explored it from two different directions and established its true extent. Fanny and William Bullock-Workman visited the Siachen on two long trips in 1911 and 1912. They climbed peaks, surveyed the area and stood on the northernmost point of the glacier, named by Mrs Bullock-Workman as Indira Col. In 1930, Prof Giotto Dainelli, the Italian scientist-explorer, camped on the glacier and returned by a new pass to the east which he named Col Italia. After a visit in 1929 by the Dutchman Dr Ph C Visser and his wife when they discovered the subsidiary Terong glaciers (it was the third of four journeys by the Vissers in the Karakoram), the Siachen was left alone for a long time, except possibly for a few visits by the intelligence parties from India.

Political agreements between India and Pakistan from 1949 to 1972 left the delineation of the Siachen glacier very vague. The Shimla Agreement of 1972 demarcated the boundary to a point known as 'Grid point NJ9842' near the Shyok river, but beyond that the line was left with the somewhat loose wording of, 'and thence north to the glaciers'. Since there was neither habitation nor troops in the desolate area, there seemed no necessity to be more precise. However, in this lack of precision lay the seed of confrontation.

It was mountaineering expeditions that brought matters to a head. Pakistan began organising and permitting expeditions to the Siachen area consisting of foreign

nationals, particularly Japanese, but always accompanied by military officers as liaison officers. Starting from Pakistan, these expeditions crossed over the Bilafond la and climbed high peaks like Teram Kangri, Singhi Kangri, Apsarasas and others. They were magnificent climbs, exploratory in nature and difficult in ascent. But with the Pakistani flag flying alongside that of Japan on each and every peak that was climbed, a political statement was also being made. This *ad hoc* control via mountain climbing was a very different ball game from the famous 'Great Game' played by the British and Russians in the valleys of the Karakoram valleys, but it aroused comparable anxieties.

India despatched two army expeditions of its own to the area in 1978 and 1981. They too climbed peaks and reconnoitred the area from a military viewpoint. Both countries interpreted the words 'thence north to the glaciers', including the Siachen and Saltoro ridge, according to their perceived interests. Finally Pakistan authorised a Japanese expedition to cross over to the extreme east of the Siachen to climb the peak Rimo I. This cartographic and physical extension would have literally linked up valleys with the eastern trade route along the Chinese border across the Karakoram Pass. Pakistan was already publishing maps, through western sources, drawing a line from NJ9842 to the Karakoram Pass, apportioning large areas to Pakistan, backed up by the *de facto* mountaineering claims.

The Indian army landed on the glacier on 13 April 1984 to prevent the Japanese expedition from proceeding further and also in response to reports that Pakistan might soon occupy the glacier. 'Guns and Roses' declared headlines in the Indian press. The glacier war had begun. The glacier that had been named after roses (*Sia* means a rose in Balti) was from now on to witness bitter fighting and the booming of artillery.

It was a very different sort of war for the Indian soldiers. There was no enemy to be seen face to face, except in sporadic incidents. Instead it was the harsh mountain environment that proved the real enemy. The Siachen base camp is at 3600m and there are some army posts up to heights of 6700m. Mere existence at such heights is an incredible hardship. A staggering 97% of casualties have been due to altitude and weather rather than enemy action. In winter the temperature dips to well below minus 40°C, blizzards can blow at more than 150km per hour and crevasses claim regular victims. To sustain operations at these altitudes, the Indian army has to ferry in supplies, kerosene and other fighting gear by helicopter. It has on the glacier the highest helipad and the highest telephone booth in the world. For the Pakistani military things are easier. Their base camp is more accessible at 2750 m and their advance posts are at lower altitudes.

It became a political imperative for Pakistan to establish a post on the Saltoro ridge in order to overlook the Siachen glacier, and equally imperative for India to prevent it. Heroic battles ensued, the most dramatic being in 1987 when, in a daring mountaineering exploit, using fixed ropes and ladders, Pakistani troops established a post on the Saltoro ridge – 'Quaid post'. In an equally heroic response, Quaid post was captured by a volunteer force of 60 Indians and renamed the 'Bana Post' in honour of Naik Subedar Bana Singh who led the final assault.

The seesaw continued while the toll mounted, both in terms of human life and environmental degradation. The pollution and damage to the environment resulting from thousands of men living on the Siachen is appalling. The mountains of cans, drums, fuel containers, tetra packs of fruit juice, aluminium packaging, medical waste,

oil and lubricants can neither be burned nor destroyed. Nor has it ever been possible to take back. And imagine the amount of human waste that is accumulating - it does not decay at this height? For 20 years on the glacier an average at least 800 people have been depositing 100gms each per day. All this garbage and waste will end up in the Nubra, which flows into the Shyok and on into the Indus - waters upon which millions depend. The Himalaya is the water tower of Asia and to juggle with its environment is to gamble with the lives of the millions of people.

It was against this background that we started working for a proposal for a trans-boundary peace park. This would ultimately enable both the armies to withdraw with honour and dignity without prejudicing their positions in Kashmir as a whole. It would stop further degradation of a magnificent mountain area, save hundreds of lives, billions of rupees and possibly point a way to solving the Kashmir imbroglio.

Trans-boundary parks are not a new idea. (See previous article 'Mountains for Peace') The recent increase in their numbers, from 50 in 1988 to 169 parks involving 113 countries today indicates a growing belief in their effectiveness. In Asia and around India the concept is well known, with parks straddling borders between India and Bhutan, India and Nepal, Pakistan and China, and Nepal and China. One very strong supporter of our idea was Aamir Ali who lives in Geneva and, having worked for the United Nations, knew how to approach the issue. We prepared briefing notes and plans and sent them to various officials and organisations in India and Pakistan. However, with both countries in a state of high tension in the 1990s our proposals hit a brick wall. When I met one of the senior secretaries in the Government of India, he dismissed the idea with contempt and raised the usual Indian question, 'why is a foreigner and a Muslim (Aamir Ali) interested in the Siachen Glacier?' (In fact, despite living in Switzerland and abroad for most of his life, Aamir has retained his Indian passport in proud commitment to his country of birth. This is how prejudice works.) Officials refused to listen to my pleas, suggesting that all I could do was to file a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court. Fortunately the Indian army was more open to our proposal. Today most senior officers are aware of the peace park plan and are supportive of it. However, unless their political masters so decide such aims can be advanced no further, at least not in India.

On 13 December 2001, armed militants attacked the Indian Parliament and troops were moved to the border with Pakistan. The two countries were on the brink of war. Yet one had to keep alive the hope that situations can change and remember that dawn comes only after the darkest hour. So we waited for dawn on the Siachen and gradually positive signs began to emerge. The first sign of hope was at the Banff Film Festival in Canada where I was able to interact with a group of senior representatives of ICUN, the nature conservation body. They seemed interested in the peace park and we formed a small committee. With their contacts in Pakistan, we could carry the idea to the right quarters there too. The advice from both the governments was to keep the issue open, lie low and push it gently. That's what we kept on doing.

In 2001, the Jungfrau-Aletsch-Betschhorn region, encompassing the longest glacier in the Alps, was designated a World Heritage site. We thought, why not aim for the same status for the longest glacier in the Himalaya? Enthusiastic support from the UIAA, the international mountaineering federation, provided a major fillip to the Siachen campaign. For 2002, the UIAA organised a 'Summit Climb' in the Alps in which Indian and Pakistani mountaineers would participate together. And so it was that Mandip Singh Soin and myself from India and Nazir Sabir and Col Sher Khan from Pakistan teamed up in Geneva and together climbed the Mönch (4099m). On

the summit, the flags of India and Pakistan were unfurled together, surely the first time in many years that this has happened on any mountain in the world. We mountaineers and environmentalist appealed together for peace in the mountains, a gesture all the more significant in International Year of Mountains.

No sooner had Indian and Pakistani mountaineers met in Geneva than we realised how much we had in common at a people-to-people level. We spoke the same language and shared the same tastes in music and sporting interests. (Nazir, a cricket buff like me, kept suggesting to the former President of Switzerland, Adolph Oggi: 'Sir let's play cricket between our two nations, even before we climb mountains.')

There was a strong desire to visit each other's countries and we realised it was only political differences that kept us apart. At no time during the climb, tied to the same rope, did it matter to me that my companion was a Pakistani or a Muslim, or to him that I was an Indian or a Hindu. Our lives depended on each other.

Several more recent developments have focused the attention of the world community, especially mountain lovers, on the need to solve the conflict and begin the task of rejuvenating the Siachen. These include an Italian proposal to push for a peace park as part of this year's K2 50th anniversary celebrations and discussion at the World Parks Congress in Durban in September 2003. If peace returns, there is likely to be a major effort to clean up the glacier with proposals already being discussed that could attract international support and finance.

Earlier this year Delhi and Islamabad began talking to each other again, with the Siachen high on the agenda. There was even the prospect of an India-Pakistan cricket tournament after more than a decade. This was due to be played in March 2004. By the time you read this, the score will be known, and more importantly, progress may have been made towards peace in the Karakoram.

At present, armies still face each other across the ridges of the Siachen. On both sides of the line of control, it is said that to honour the soldiers whose blood has been spilled, not an inch of territory should be given up. Yet isn't there a more powerful case for saying that these brave men could best be honoured by protecting this spectacular mountain area consecrated by their sacrifice? Our young people, whether soldiers or civilians, Pakistanis or Indians, deserve to be able to enjoy such an area. When I pressed this issue while accepting the RGS Patron's Medal in 2003, I said:

'We are nations linked by Himalayan geography. Nations which do not understand and respect geography are condemned by history. Governments and people of both countries should realise that there is a humanity that binds us together, whatever our game and whichever our side of the fence.'

Thankfully the wheels of peace are moving positively and for several months (at the time of writing) there has been a complete ceasefire in Kashmir, and particularly on the heights of the Siachen. The trans-boundary park could be a positive force in cementing the peace and rehabilitating an environment in which ibexes and snow leopards can roam and the wild *Sia* bloom. Then mountaineers can return to this majestic landscape redolent with the romance of early exploration. There is too, an ambition among climbers from both nations that we will be able to walk up the glacier and, with a shake of hands at the border pass, bring that spirit of comradeship displayed on the Mönch to reality on the Siachen glacier.

