

Nature devours men on world's highest battlefield

SIACHEN BASE CAMP: Nowhere in the world is there a battlefield so remote, so high and so alien.

In this wasteland of rock and ice, soldiers fight each other and the weather at heights above 18,000 feet, their bodies wasting away, starved of oxygen.

"They look like animals when they come down, unshaven, dirty and thin as rods," is how one soldier described his comrades. Yet since 1984, India and Pakistan have been fighting for control of the Siachen Glacier and the surrounding tangle of mountains where South Asia, Central Asia and China collide.

Today, so great is the mistrust between the nuclear-armed neighbours, which came close to war last year, that neither side will withdraw its troops, fearing the other will move in. The battle is not for the land itself the entire area is uninhabitable but for national pride and a belief that holding the heights of Siachen offers a strategic advantage.

The third pole, as the 76 kilometres long Siachen Glacier is also called, lies north of Kashmir, the Muslim-majority region disputed by India and Pakistan since their independence in 1947.

For many years, little thought was given to the 'land of the glaciers', where the jagged peaks of the Karakoram Mountains spill down into high arid plateaux. But in the 1980s, Pakistan began

what India called "cartographic aggression", showing the Siachen Glacier on its maps and authorising mountaineering expeditions to the region.

On April 13, 1984 India, fearing Pakistan would use control of Siachen to link up with its traditional ally China, airlifted in troops, who scrambled to occupy the passes leading into the Glacier before Pakistani troops counterattacked. "We beat them by three days," recalls Brigadier H.P.S. Bedi, who commands India's Siachen Brigade. "That started a race for whatever height each side could take".

Since then the armies have dug in on whatever high points they could hold, sometimes within sight of each other.

They shell each other, or shoot at each other, but rarely to much effect, their ability to fight hampered by the thin air and sheer challenge of operating in the extreme cold. Only three percent of casualties here are from fighting. The rest die in avalanches, fall into crevasses, or succumb to high-altitude sickness.

"It's a godforsaken place," comments a helicopter pilot who spent three months on the Glacier a few years ago and now flies in daily supplies to the troops. "The hardest thing is the isolation," he says. "I didn't see a stone for three months. I didn't have a bath for three months."

World's highest road: To get to Siachen, you have to drive from Leh, cap-

ital of the Buddhist-dominated region of Ladakh, across a desert of barren rock and over the world's highest motorable pass at Khardung La, where the narrow road winds dizzyingly to a height of 18,300 feet (5,600 metres).

Then it plunges down into the Nubra Valley, a broad, empty flood plain, hemmed in on either side by huge walls of rock like a giant amphitheatre.

More than four hours later, the walls of the Valley nearly converge and the road peters out into a dirt track, now within range of Pakistani shelling. Ahead is the Siachen Glacier, a slow-moving river of ice and rock which runs across the top of the mountain before tumbling down into a sea of hardened mud and silt.

On the left is the Siachen Base Camp, a collection of camouflaged corrugated huts built into the lee of the hill to avoid shellfire. "Here great courage and fortitude is the norm," says a sign over the gate. To the right, is the source of the Nubra River, where the pale turquoise waters emerge from underneath the Glacier and wind past towering cliffs of sheer black ice.

Helicopters buzz back and forth ferrying supplies to the troops, while at base camp, soldiers preparing for deployment practise scaling ice walls and rappelling on ropes. On one of the paths leading up to the Glacier is a small Hindu temple where Indian regiments who have served there

have planted dozens of banners. The temple is dedicated to O P Babi, a soldier who disappeared on the Glacier in the early years. Troops believe he keeps guard over them during their tour of duty.

The ultimate adventure: Indian officials estimate it costs India and Pakistan some 30 million rupees (\$660,000) a day each to keep their troops deployed on the world's highest battlefield, where temperatures can fall to minus 50 degrees Celsius (minus 58 degrees Fahrenheit). Troops are given the best equipment and rations available from Cadbury's Fruit and Nut chocolate bars to tempt troops to eat despite the loss of appetite at high altitude, to Swiss army knives, Austrian boots and French waterproof gaiters. It costs 51,000 rupees (\$1,123) just to clothe one soldier. Rations and kerosene are flown by helicopter in what the army says is the longest, highest and most expensive air maintenance operation in the world.

Troops follow a rigorous acclimatisation schedule to allow their bodies to adapt to high altitude, spending time first resting and then training at specified heights until they are ready to go to their posts. But above 18,000 feet (5,500 metres) where most of the forward posts are located the body can no longer acclimatise. It steadily deteriorates, muscles wasting away as they try to redirect scarce

oxygen to the heart and lungs. After frostbite, the biggest sickness is High Altitude Pulmonary Oedema, where the lungs fill up with fluid. The patient will literally drown if he is not brought down quickly. Deployment at such heights is limited to 90 days, still far far longer than most mountaineers spend at such altitudes.

"Psychologically, the second month is very bad," says Rohit, the helicopter pilot. Curiosity, he says, takes you through the first month and then the third month is spent counting days. "The second month is cruel. You want out and there are still so many days to go by," he says. Most of the time officers focus on keeping their men busy, either going out to collect supplies from the helipad, or laboriously checking for warning signs of frostbite.

Even a little bit of extra sweat inside a glove, not dealt with quickly, can lead to frostbite. Thousands have died fighting over this uninhabitable land.

As the years go by, the two armies have lowered the death rate through better medical help and infrastructure. Prefabricated reinforced fibre huts warmed by kerosene stoves and equipped with video players have begun to replace tents. Though it remains a huge psychological challenge, ambitious young officers are all too keen to get a Siachen posting under their belt. "It's the ultimate adventure," says Rohit. —Reuters