

INTERVIEW-India's Fernandes sees no nuclear danger.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

819 words

31 May 1999

21:46

Reuters News

English

(c) 1999 Reuters Limited

NEW DELHI, May 31 (Reuters) - India's Defence Minister George Fernandes said on Monday he was sure Pakistan's military chiefs would not resort to the use of nuclear weapons against India because they would "liquidate" their own country in the process.

Asked if the Kashmir fighting, the worst between the bitter neighbours in nearly three decades, might worsen into the use of their newly acquired nuclear weapons, Fernandes told Reuters in an interview:

"I am sure Pakistani generals may have other ideas about themselves but I don't think they are also longing to liquidate their whole country," Fernandes said.

"I am sure (Pakistan's) military men may have their ambitions in terms of being partners in power, but I am sure they are also sensible people when it comes to nuclear weapons because a nuclear weapon is not just killing your enemy but also killing yourself."

Fernandes, who toured Kashmir's frontier areas on Sunday, drew a graphic picture of the fighting over the past three weeks to evict hundreds of heavily armed militants who have dug themselves into high ridges in India's Drass, Kargil and Batalik sectors.

He said Indian soldiers were taking out infiltrators' pockets "hill by hill", sometimes in hand-to-hand combat, in difficult high-altitude terrain on India's side of a ceasefire line, the Line of Control, which divides Kashmir.

He said on May 6, as the snow began to melt in Kashmir's high passes, a shepherd tending his flock tipped off authorities he had sighted some "foreign elements...(who) looked like people who are here for some mischief".

Two Indian army patrols were sent to investigate on May 8 and 10. Both were ambushed by the militants, who had taken position behind "sangars" or walls built with boulders atop ridges. India began to pour men and materiel into the area on May 10.

Its air force began to strafe militant positions on May 26, and now that rebel targets have been "softened" the Indian army has launched a fierce ground campaign, Fernandes said.

"Even while this operation of going hill by hill and flushing them out is on, our troops have also moved to the rear and have established positions there in order to cut the exit points and also prevent any kind of supplies from coming in.

"It is the terrain which is the biggest problem. The terrain enabled these people to come and it is the terrain which will take some extra effort to see that these fellows are flushed out."

Fernandes said neither India nor Pakistan had bothered to set up permanent sentry posts in the areas now swarming with infiltrators because of the inhospitable terrain.

"Because you are here in glaciated mountain terrain, heights ranging between 14,000 to 17,000 feet (4,270 and 5,180 metres), and therefore over the years both sides had chosen by tacit understanding...(to not) run into each other's territory here."

But the infiltration by about 700 men from the Pakistan side was a "very well-planned operation", Fernandes said. "It is not something that has suddenly happened."

He said India believed the intrusions took place in April after snow had melted from the points of ingress.

"In Chhorbatla and Drass there has been hand-to-hand combat, because...our soldiers have gone up by rope to reach the points where these fellows are dug in.



"As of this morning our army's total casualties were 43 killed and 173 wounded and 12 missing including three officers. The air force has lost five killed including three officers. About 320 militants along with 150 Pakistani regular soldiers have been killed in the operations," Fernandes said.

He said he would like to bring the air and ground offensive against the infiltrators to a quick end.

But Fernandes, who flew over the combat zones on Sunday, said: "One could see the magnitude of the task our soldiers face at the moment. I wouldn't fix any time frame."

"What we have seen in the past 15-20 days is the reality on the ground which is we are in very mountainous territory...and therefore the fight for each of these mountaintops calls for a lot of effort. There aren't even mule tracks in that area."

He said the Pakistan-backed infiltrators had been pushed back in "all sectors".

"We have been using both air power and all our firepower and all said and done they are sitting on the top up there with no place to escape, to that extent they are easy targets too."

He said the infiltrators were a mix of regular Pakistani soldiers, "some of them in uniform"; Kashmiri separatists based in Pakistan; tribesmen from Pakistan's Baltistan region; and Afghan mercenaries. "This is the broad profile of the intruders."

(C) Reuters Limited 1999.

Document lba0000020010907dv5v07f8u

© 2006 Dow Jones Reuters Business Interactive LLC (trading as Factiva). All rights reserved.

