



## Indian soldier caught in grinding Kashmir strife.

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BARAMULLA, India, Aug 9 (Reuters) - Mahendra Kumar is a typical "sepoy", the lowest rank in the Indian army.

After 14 years in uniform, the native of the impoverished northern state of Bihar is paid about 5,000 rupees (\$117) a month. On paper, he gets two months' vacation every year, and otherwise is on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

He is dressed in battle fatigues and a heavy, 25 kg (55 lb) flak jacket. He has just done a stint in a forward "picket", a gunner's perch on the volatile Line of Control that divides Indian and Pakistani troops exchanging a deadly artillery barrage.

"I see my wife once a year," the weary young soldier said.

At dawn every morning other Indian soldiers like Sepoy Mahendra Kumar trudge up the highway to this Kashmir town, lugging mine detectors, radio sets and leading sniffer dogs.

They have been trained to look out for a freshly-scuffed patch of dirt, a suspicious hollow in a tree or discarded cans of vegetable oil that might conceal mines.

The ROPs (road opening parties) form a vital part of everyday life in India's violence-torn Kashmir.

They are looking for guerrillas hiding in the fields of tall maize or saffron and for "improvised explosive devices" and booby traps in the groves of poplar and willow that border the road to the tense frontier with Pakistan.

Traffic starts moving on the highway only after the patrols have radioed back an all-clear, and throughout the long, hot summer day the soldiers continue to guard the road.

Eight years after a fierce Moslem separatist revolt against Indian rule erupted in the Kashmir valley, the army has become a part of life in the tense disputed region.

India is slowly beginning to take notice of this "peacetime war". From 1990, when the fighting began, until last month, the government says 807 soldiers, 2,982 civilians and 7,192 militants died in the crossfire. Nearly 3,000 soldiers and more than 5,600 civilians were wounded.

But estimates by police and hospital sources put the number of those killed in this eight-year-period at more than 25,000.

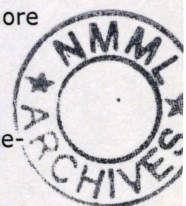
India's army has deployed 150,000 men in northern Kashmir. Their lives are controlled from huge "cantonments" or garrison bases where the shrieks of helicopter rotors drown out the birdcalls in this once-peaceful tourist paradise.

Authorities say the back of the uprising has been broken, but sporadic ambushes by the guerrillas still take place.

"The whole infrastructure has been destroyed and restoring it is a slow affair," General Krishan Pal, who heads the army's 15th Corps in Kashmir, told Reuters in a recent interview.

The general said civilian authorities were beginning to pay more attention to the lot of the average soldier.

"In the past this aspect was not receiving the same attention. But lately there is a greater awareness. There is





greater sensitisation, and that is a heartening factor," Pal said.

The militants, and the All Parties Hurriyat (freedom) Conference, an umbrella grouping of separatist parties, have accused the Indian army of human rights abuses.

"I don't believe soldiers as a body indulge in human rights abuses," said Pal.

"There is a great deal of awareness in the Indian army and training programmes stress this aspect.

"This is not to suggest that some criminal acts don't take place. But they are at an individual level. These criminal acts are well covered by India's laws and our Army Act."

General Pal said there were some black sheep among his men.

"You always have some aberrations. These aberrations get corrected by way of deterrent punishment and there is a very good internal mechanism," he said, citing the example of an Indian soldier recently jailed for 10 years for rape.

"There is no way we are going to hide any cases of criminality because otherwise these will become rampant and will affect the the foundation of the army which is based on discipline."

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