

Over 1,000 infiltrators still in Kashmir - India.

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NEW DELHI, July 8 (Reuters) - India's army has recaptured key points in Kashmir and eased the pressure on a strategic highway, but there are still more than 1,000 infiltrators clinging to high ridges, a senior defence official said on Thursday.

Painting a detailed picture of the Kashmir fighting, now in its ninth week, the official said the infiltrators were well-supplied along newly laid tracks on Pakistan's side of the Line of Control (LOC) dividing Kashmir.

"They are kept supplied by yaks, mules and snowmobiles. We also know their helicopters bring supplies into valleys on our side of the LOC," the official told Reuters. He said Pakistani helicopters frequently darted in to drop supplies on the flanks of hills that were outside the range of India's radar.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said India was sceptical there would be an early end to the infiltration.

He said despite an agreement at the weekend between Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and U.S. President Bill Clinton to take "concrete steps" to restore normality along the Line of Control (LOC) dividing Kashmir, "the reality is different".

The infiltrators, consisting mainly of men from Pakistan's Northern Light Infantry, Chitral Scouts, and Skardu Rangers, were dug into four pockets strung along the Indian side of the Line of Control (LOC) dividing Kashmir, the official said.

"The Pakistanis have about six companies (of men) in the Batalik sector, one company in the Kaksar sub-sector, company-plus strength in the Drass sub-sector, and about five companies of men in the Mushkoh sub-sector," the Indian official said.

Each company has an average fighting strength of 80 men, the official said. "Pakistan's FCNA (Force Commander Northern Areas) has stationed the army's 2nd Brigade and the 80th Brigade in Gultari and Olthingthang on their side of the LOC," he said.

The infiltration was heaviest in the Mushkoh, Drass and Batalik areas, and the guerrillas nearly reached India's National Highway 1-A, the official said. "It was touch and go. If they had cut off the highway, we would have effectively lost that swathe of territory and found it impossible to fight back," he said.

Seven weeks of strafing and, more recently, laser-guided bombing of infiltrators' nests atop ridgelines have softened targets, the official said.

"But Indian casualties are quite stiff. We have a ratio of three wounded for every man killed. The other side has lost well over 600 men. This sort of fighting is beyond the capacity of amateurs or insurgents," he said, referring to Pakistan's repeated insistence that the infiltrators are Kashmiri "freedom fighters".

Because Pakistan refused to acknowledge that its Army was involved in the infiltration, the Indian official said, Indian troops were presented with a peculiar problem when they recaptured bunkers or cleared hilltops of occupying forces.

"We have over 100 bodies, the majority of them Pakistani Army personnel, and we cannot hand them back to Pakistan because they claim they are not theirs," the Indian official said.

He said the bodies were discovered in destroyed bunkers or buried in shallow graves by hastily retreating infiltrators.

The biggest pocket of occupation by the infiltrators was in the Mushkoh area, the official said. After the capture of the strategic Tiger Hill last weekend, infiltrators were now confined to a small pocket in the Drass sub-sector.



"But there is no sign whatsoever that they are about to give up the fight," the Indian official said. "This is going to be a long, long haul."

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...as they
...the theatre of combat,
...defence officials say.

Conversations over the weekend with Reuters, the officials said army strategists were raring to expand the
...by crossing the Line of Control (LOC) in northern Kashmir - or even the less volatile international
...in other sectors - in order to win leverage with Pakistan.

...our boys are fighting with one arm tied behind them because we are
...of the LOC," one official told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

The officials pointedly quoted Indian Army Chief General V.P. Malik, who told reporters last month
...the situation all the time and I believe that if it becomes necessary to cross the LOC to the sup
...interest, the matter will be taken up in the (government) cabinet."

Indian troops have been locked in bloody fighting for nearly two months on the Indian side of the LOC that
...divides Kashmir between the nuclear-capable neighbours.

...describes as Pakistani army regulars mixed with Afghan mercenaries and tribesmen
...north-east Pakistan who pushed across the LOC as the snows melted this spring to seize strategic hilltops
...and ridges along a 140-km (87-mile) stretch in the Draf, Kargil and Batalik sectors.

The hostile neighbours share a 1,690-km (1,050-mile) international border, which extends into the 740-km
...LOC, and finally a poorly delineated Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) on the Siachen Glacier in
...the far north, scene of dogged high-altitude battles since the mid-1980s.

...announced on Sunday that it had captured the key Tiger Hill, which overlooks a
...Kashmir highway, after days of fierce fighting, the defence officials said a decision to punch back
...the border into Pakistan could only be taken by India's political establishment.

"Ultimately it is a political decision. We can easily cross the Line of Control but there are many implications.
...but we can only do it if we get the nod from the political establishment," said a second senior defence official.

"Technically it would be delightful if we can cross the Line of Control. And then why just the LOC - why not the
...international border?"

"The pressure that we would bring to bear on the enemy would then be all the greater. If we have a
...across the international border we can demonstrate our superiority in an expanded theatre."

"Was India holding back for fear that Pakistan might resort to unleashing a nuclear weapon?"

"It takes two to play this game, and it's a very dangerous game," the second senior official said. "I don't credit
...the Pakistanis with brains, more with brawn. There will be elements of (nuclear) blackmail at all."

The officials said the fighting was proving very costly in terms of lost lives. Officially, India says it has lost 250
...and 430 wounded, but military sources say the casualties are significantly higher.

"Mountain warfare is costly; the mountains are cruel. The Indian army is an officer-led army and you are not
...in corps strength. Even 20 of the initiatives on top of a ridge can keep a battalion-sized force of
...at bay," the first defence official said. "It's sheer guts, blood and steel."

On Friday Indian military spokesman vowed to fight through the severe Kashmir winter if necessary to evict
...the militants.

"It would be very easy to open new fronts for our troops on Pakistan," the second defence official said.

