

## **TROOP REDUCTION IN J&K – NO CAUSE FOR ANXIETY**

**Daily Excelsior Dec 14, 2004**

The recent statement by the Prime Minister on troop reduction in J&K and the actual pull out of troops that has since taken place seems to have caused much panic among certain sections of the people of the State. It is feared that a reduction in the number of troops engaged in counter insurgency operations would amount to lowering of guard on the part of Security Forces that in turn would enable the militant (read terrorists) to step up their activities. The fact that the demand for reduction of troops in J&K originated from the militants and their sponsors within and outside the State has lent credence to this fear. The assurances being doled out by the Government and military authorities that even after the planned reduction there would still be enough troops in J&K to carry on the war against terrorism effectively and that troops would be re-inducted in case found necessary have so far failed to allay the people's fears. Evidently the faith of the people in their Government is lacking due, perhaps, to the fast record of bungling of Kashmir policy by the party in power at the Centre today. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's soft looks and speech that given an impression that he could be acting under international pressure has only added to the people's anxiety.

The situation may not, however, be as bad as it appears and the fears of the people not too well founded. For, while the Prime Minister may not be as soft as he appears, he could not have acted entirely on his own. He surely would have consulted his security advisors and the military authorities before taking such a decision. His emphatic refusal to agree to an internal cease-fire with the militants seems to have been the result of such consultations. Apparently the Army, which has ultimately to face the music, is backing the Prime Minister to the hilt and we have no option but to take its word on it. Even the Indian National Congress that now leads the UPA Government has come a long way from the pre 1962 era noted for idealism and appeasement in matters of national security, for the people to worry about it any more. The bungling of the Kashmir policy that it is being charged with also refers only to the petty politics for party gains that it indulged in during the pre-militancy period and not to any aspect of national security. The Congress need not, therefore, be mistrusted on this issue. In case with facts and figures pertaining to the total number of troops presently deployed in J&K, the number being withdrawn, and the strength that would still remain to deal with the militants, not available to them the people are hardly in a position to assess the implication of the Government's move. They cannot even know whether the reduction is for real or just a move to roll back the additional troops that had been inducted during the Kargil war and 'Operation Parakaram' and had continued to stay back. The demand for reduction of troops is also not of the militants and their sponsor's alone. It is also that of a large number of peace loving Kashmiris even if for a different reason. Many innocent Kashmiris are known to suffer in the factors fire between the militants and the Security Forces when the former target the latter in inhabited urban areas. The Prime Minister may have had such people in mind when he made the announcement. It could even be that the reduction of troops is India's own requirement also and the fanfare with which it is being carried out is a diplomatic move seeking to make a virtue of this necessity. The necessity for withdrawal of troops could have arisen due to a variety of circumstances as discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

Technically speaking there are three stages of counter insurgency. Stage one is at the start of insurgency when the initiative rests with the militants and the Security Forces are on the defensive. During this stage the Security Forces are expected to build up their maximum strength in order to gain ascendancy over the insurgents. The second stage starts when the Security Forces have gained the required ascendancy to be able to go on the offensive and build maximum pressure on the militants. During this stage the Security Forces must maintain their force level to keep the militants on the run. The last stage is when, though the militancy continues to simmer, the back of the militants is generally broken. This is the stage when the bulk of the troops can be withdrawn and replaced by the civil police or Para military forces, the political process started and the "healing touch" extended to the effected people. In practical terms, however, the dividing lines between the three stages are not as clear as they appear in theory. When a particular stage ends and the other starts is purely a matter of assessment by those involved - the Government and the Security Forces. At what stage of counter insurgency was stand in Kashmir today can, therefore, form a subject of much controversy. Not many people seem to think that we are in the third stage that warrants a reduction in troops. They cite figures on infiltration and incidents of militancy related violence that still continue to occur, to support their view. The Government and the Security Forced probably think differently. If we were to compare the situation as it exists today with what it was a few years back we may tend to agree with the assessment that the militants are no longer the potent force that they used to be.

One of the principles of employment of the Army in counter insurgency is that the Army must not be employed in this role a day longer than is necessary. Continuous contact with the local population over prolonged periods, combined with chances of little or only remote command and control being exercised over him by his superiors, make the soldier vulnerable to temptations which could affect his discipline and moral character. Every effort has, therefore, to be made to protect these essential attributes of the soldier from getting eroded. The Army must not be used in counter insurgency any more than is absolutely necessary also because it must be provided adequate time for training in its primary role of defence against external aggression. Most of the Indian Army today is deployed for counter insurgency operations in the north, east, or the north-east and gets little or no time for training for war. This is not to talk of the fact that the calls to Army units for service in insurgency infested areas, as part of the turn over programme, are so often that the officers and men get little time to spend with their families in peace stations.

All in all it would appear that the furor that is being created over the Government announcement on reduction of troops in J&K is not really necessary. The decision on what strength is required to meet a particular situation is the prerogative of the Army. Let us trust our Army and allow it this privilege.