

How many more soldiers need to die before India and Pakistan create a Siachen Glaciar demilitarised zone?

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A Statement from the Asian Human Rights Commission

PAKISTAN: How many more soldiers need to die before India and Pakistan create a Siachen Glaciar demilitarised zone?

Some of the harshest weather conditions in the world may be experienced on the Siachen Glaciers and it is this very location that two of the bitterest enemies of the region maintain bases.

The Siachen Glaciers are the highest glaciers on earth and some of the bases are situated at over 6,000 metres. A result of a conflict that started in 1984, during the military government of General Zia, with India's successful Operation Meghdoot, Pakistan lost control of the glacier and was forced to retreat west of the Saltoro Ridge. India established control over the 70 kilometre-long Siachen Glacier and all of its tributary glaciers, as well as the three main passes of the Saltoro Ridge immediately west of the glacier. Pakistan was able to maintain control of the glacial valleys immediately west of the Saltoro Ridge but it lost more than 1,000 square miles (3,000 km²) of territory because of its military operations in Siachen.

In recent years both sides of lost hundreds of men to the vanity of maintaining control over a system of glaciers where nothing grows, no minerals are to be found and where even the grass is afraid to grow. There is no sane reason to sacrifice even one more human life. The recent tragedy is a result of the warmongering attitude of both governments that are willing to spend billions of dollars a year to maintain control over what is nothing more than an icy hell.

It is a conservative estimation that each year 100 Pakistani soldiers and 200 India soldiers are killed by avalanches or inclement weather. On April 7, 124 military personnel and 11 civilians were engulfed in an avalanche that buried them under an estimated 80 feet of snow and ice. Rescue attempts were foiled from the very start by the weather and conditions which prevented rescuers from reaching the site. Bulldozers and excavators are being used to shift the ice but due to the conditions, progress is slow. Three days after the incident not one victim had been located, dead or alive and their chances of survival decrease with each passing hour. According to one official, "If the avalanche broke into the military barracks, then the survival chances are very low; if not, then we can hope they may be safe".

In addition to American and British relief teams around 200 military personnel and 100 civilians are taking part in the rescue operation. The Chief of Army Staff, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani is also reported to be present at the site which is a unique situation as the vast majority of the army

hierarchy is content to sit in the comfort and safety of their offices in Islamabad. Recently there have been reports that the two governments are beginning to realise the futility of maintaining these bases at the cost of millions of rupees a day. Reportedly they are hoping to reach an understanding to demilitarise the glaciers. According to another report civil society organizations in both countries are calling upon their respective governments to set an example by converting the Siachen Glaciers into the first ever 'peace park' at a height of 22,000 feet.

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) wishes to convey our deep condolences to the families of the Pakistani soldiers and civilians who have lost their lives in this tragedy. The AHRC appeals to both the governments of Pakistan and India to withdraw their forces use the money they will save to bolster their education and health sectors.