

# AFGHAN ARMY FIGHTS ON AS US WEIGHS TROOP INCREASE

**CHAPARHAR, Afghanistan:** From his sandbagged command post outside the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad, Brigadier General Mohammad Nasim Sangin says he needs more troops and equipment to beat the Taliban and hold on to ground his soldiers take. But one thing he does not want is foreign troops returning to frontline combat in Afghanistan. "We know our own country better and we can defeat our enemies ourselves," he says. "NATO can help Afghan forces with training, they can provide more equipment but we will recruit Afghans."

As US and NATO officials contemplate the way forward in Afghanistan, government soldiers face a resilient enemy and an array of problems from lack of equipment, poor leadership, political interference and chronic corruption. While high-profile attacks in the capital Kabul, such as the truck bomb that killed more than 80 people last week, grab headlines, a grinding conflict in the provinces is costing the lives of hundreds of soldiers and police a month.

A soldier since his teenage years with the anti-Soviet mujahideen in the 1980s, Sangin has been leading his brigade in a clearing operation to drive insurgent fighters out of Chaparhar, a district of

mud-walled compounds dotted with poppy fields ready for harvest. The occasional rattle of machine gun fire can be heard from the fighting a couple of kilometres away but he says the operation has gone well, with the district center now clear at the cost of only a handful of casualties. However, experience has shown that there is no certainty of holding on to the gains.

"We launch operations, we carry out searches and push the insurgents to the mountains. Later, I have to take my forces to other places for operations and as soon as we leave the area the insurgents return," he said. US officials are preparing plans that have been expected to see some 3,000-5,000 more military trainers sent to Afghanistan and fears have grown that this could be a prelude to the United States being sucked back into the war.

### Overstretch

Sixteen years after the US-led campaign that ousted the Taliban, more than 13,000 foreign troops remain in Afghanistan, down from a peak of more than 100,000, but NATO officials have said repeatedly they will not resume the combat mission they ended in 2014. However, officials say plans are being considered

which would see more trainers at times move out of Corps headquarters down to brigade-level operations such as the one being carried out by Sangin's men in Chaparhar, increasing the likelihood of their being drawn into fighting.

Despite assurances from foreign and Afghan officials about progress in improving leadership and tackling corruption, security forces have struggled to contain the insurgency and now control no more than 60 percent of the country. Most of the issues the troops talk about - lack of reinforcements and equipment, endless tours of duty - are well known despite promises of improvement.

At the same time, security forces have suffered what the US Congressional watchdog SIGAR described as "shockingly high" casualties. Official figures are patchy but at least 807 soldiers and police were killed in the first six weeks of the year after 6,785 in the first 10 months of 2016. Privately, many officials say the real numbers are even higher. The heavy casualties have also contributed to the other persistent problem facing the army, maintaining the strength of the units doing the fighting. A third of the security forces' personnel does not re-enlist every year and the actual number of troops available for duty is far below

official totals, leaving front-line troops increasingly stretched.

"It was very dangerous and busy last year but this year, it's been busier," said Assadullah, a sergeant who, like many Afghans, goes by one name. "We were in Achin and when that operation we were in Torkham and now we're in Chaparhar without any break." "I haven't been home in seven months. I go from one position to another. We're tired but there's no alternative."

**Questions**

Even in Nangarhar, where Islamic State has established a foothold but is otherwise a relatively stable province, the army is conducting active operations in nine districts, compared with just three last year, officers said. In other parts of the country, like the opium-rich Taleban heartlands of Helmand and Kandahar in the south and Badakhshan and Kunduz in the north, the situation is much worse.

Although General Sangin and his commanders say morale is good among their men, several of whom have the red, black and green of the Afghan flag strapped jauntily around their magazine clips, it does not take much effort to hear other points of view. As well as high casualties and the relentless tempo of opera-

tions, morale is sapped by political corruption that persists despite President Ashraf Ghani's efforts to stamp it out, leading some soldiers to ask what they are fighting for.

In Chaparhar, where the poppy fields reach into the district center, powerful interests follow operations closely. "We are not fighting for the nation, we are fighting for a mafia," said one officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "We'll arrest some insurgents during an operation and soon we get a call from powerful figures inside government to let them go. We are soldiers and we have to obey orders. But the next day, when we go to another operation, our soldiers do not fight the way they were fighting previously. They believe that this is a fight for no reason," the officer said.

It is hard to know how widespread such feelings are but soldiers have continued to fight and die in numbers that underline the resilience of the troops, however battered their morale. Despite the setbacks, they have held up. Sangin, a stocky, confident figure with thick black eyebrows and a salt and pepper beard says that after more than three decades, warfare has become a way of life. "I've always been at war. All the time. It hasn't been comfortable." —Reuters



**SRINAGAR:** Indian government forces search a car in central Srinagar yesterday. —AFP

## INDIAN TROOPS IN KASHMIR KILL 4 'SUICIDE' ATTACKERS

**SRINAGAR:** Indian paramilitary forces killed four suspected suicide attackers who tried to storm their camp in the disputed Kashmir region early yesterday. The gunmen lobbed grenades and fired automatic weapons outside the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) camp in Indian-administered Kashmir before dawn, a spokesman said. "They tried to storm the camp but they were not even allowed to enter the gate," CRPF spokesman Bhuvish Choudhary told AFP.

Choudhary described the men as "heavily armed fidayeen", a term commonly used to mean suicide attacker in Kashmir. "All the four attackers were eliminated in a clean and wonderful operation. There were no injuries on our side," he added. Four assault rifles, grenades and other ammunition were recovered from the bodies of the slain attackers, whose identities were not known. No group has claimed the attack.

"They were carrying huge amounts of ammunition and did not appear to be locals," said director general of police, S P

Vaid. The foiled attack in the northern Sumbal area came amid renewed tension in Kashmir following the killing last month of a top rebel leader, which sparked fresh protests against Indian rule. Kashmir has been divided between India and Pakistan since the end of British rule in 1947, but both claim the territory in its entirety.

Rebel groups have since 1989 been fighting roughly 500,000 Indian soldiers deployed in the region, demanding independence or a merger with Pakistan. The fighting has left tens of thousands dead, most of them civilians. Dozens of local youths have joined the rebel ranks since last year when the killing of a popular rebel commander sparked wide-scale anti-India protests that left more than 100 civilians dead and thousands wounded. India regularly accuses Pakistan of arming and training rebels and sending them across the heavily militarized Line of Control (LoC) that divides the territory to attack its forces. Islamabad denies the allegations. —AFP

# TENANTS PAYING 30¢ RENT OPPOSE REVAMP OF HOMES

## MUMBAI CHAWLS SET TO BE REDEVELOPED

**MUMBAI:** Madhuri Dewar remembers her wedding in 1981 in the tenement building where she had lived all her life: Guests sat in the colorful tent in the courtyard, packed the corridor and squeezed into the one-room home she shared with her parents. Today, Dewar, 65, lives with her husband in the same room in a Bombay Development Directorate (BDD) "chawl" - a building divided into small rooms with shared toilets - in Naigaon in central Mumbai. Her two sons and their families live in two rooms across from her, and the families walk into each other's homes all day.

But after four generations, their way of life is under threat as city officials are set to redevelop the colonial-era BDD chawls in four locations in south and central Mumbai. "We have lived here for so many years. My family is here, all my neighbors are friends," said Dewar. "We would like to have bigger homes, become owners, but we do not know if our lives are going to be the same after the redevelopment, if we will all be together like we are now."

About a third of India's 1.25 billion population lives in cities, with the numbers rising every year as tens of thousands of people leave villages to seek better prospects. Up to 37 million households - a quarter of the country's urban population - live in informal housing including slums and chawls because of a critical shortage of affordable housing, according to social consultancy FSG.

### Shared Courtyard

Mumbai's BDD chawls were built in the 1920s to house textile mill workers. Some were built as prisons, then converted into military barracks and low-cost housing for migrant laborers. More than 16,500 families live in the four BDD chawls spread across more than 93 acres of land in prime sites. They pay a monthly rent of about 18-20 rupees (about 30 US cents) each. The rooms, measuring 160 sq ft (15 sq m) each, have been modified by families over the years, some carving out a kitchen and a toilet as their means improved.

There is a shared open courtyard where children play and festivals and weddings are celebrated. In the corridors, washing is hung and children's bicycles parked. The chawls - in close proximity to offices, schools and public transport - are rare enclaves of affordable housing in a city with some of the most expensive real estate in the world. Plans to redevelop the chawls in the space-starved city have been made and shelved repeatedly over the years as governments changed and residents opposed the plans.

Now, the buildings are so dilapidated that they must be knocked down, officials say. "The buildings have outlived their life spans," said SD Lakhe, vice chairman of state agency Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (MHADA). "These people deserve safer, bigger homes with better amenities," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

**Random Cut-Off**

India has a shortage of around 20 million urban homes, according to consultancy KPMG. In financial hub Mumbai, about 60 percent of the 18 million population live in crowded slums and other informal homes. States are rushing to meet a 'Housing for All' target by 2022, which aims to create 20 million new urban homes and 30 million rural homes. The plan for the BDD chawls is to give tenants two-bedroom flats measuring 500 sq ft (46 sq m) each in high-rise towers. A third of the land will be developed and sold commercially to help meet the project cost of more than \$1 billion.

Residents say MHADA reneged on a vow to let

them pick a developer, instead floating tenders without informing them. Also, only tenants who can prove they lived there before 1996 are eligible for a new flat. Anyone who owns property elsewhere in Mumbai is barred. Several residents' associations have filed petitions against MHADA's plans and have threatened to protest.

"MHADA did not take us into confidence and are going ahead without our consent. This is a violation of our rights," said Raju Waghmare, a spokesman for residents in the Naigaon chawl. "Everyone who lives here deserves a home; the cut-off date is random. And those who bought a property are being punished for prospering," said Waghmare, who estimates about half the residents may not be eligible under these conditions. Public hearings were held for chawl residents, and contracts were given to builders Larsen & Toubro and Shapoorji Pallonji following a "transparent and thorough" procedure, Lakhe said. A cut-off date is essential to ensure only legitimate tenants get new apartments, he said. —Reuters

## INDIA LAUNCHES FRAUD PROBE INTO LEADING NEWS CHANNEL

**NEW DELHI:** Indian federal investigators launched a fraud probe yesterday into the founders of news channel NDTV, in a step the channel denounced as an attempt to muzzle free speech in the world's largest democracy. Two senior officials at the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) said it had registered a case against NDTV founders Prannoy Roy and his wife, Radhika Roy, for causing an alleged loss of 480 million rupees (\$7.45 million) to a bank.

The company refuted the allegations and accused the CBI of "concerted harassment of NDTV and its promoters based on the same old endless false accusations". "NDTV and its promoters will fight tirelessly against this witch-hunt by multiple agencies. We will not succumb to these attempts to blatantly undermine democracy and free speech in India," NDTV said in a statement.

The investigation comes at a time of often heated, polarizing debate in India's fiercely competitive TV news industry, where chan-

nels sometimes test the boundaries of responsible journalism and prime-time talk shows are often rowdy and contentious. Police conducted raids at Roy's residence in New Delhi and at two vacation homes. Neither of the couple were available for comment but NDTV presenter Srinivasan Jain said the "message is clear". "Any independent voices in media will be bullied and shut down. Black day," tweeted Jain.

The CBI said the investigation had no link to the editorial line of NDTV, India's oldest English-language all-news channel. "We have nothing against NDTV's news coverage... they are accused of a financial fraud and it's our duty to investigate," a senior CBI official said. India slipped by three places to 136th in this year's World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders, which highlighted concerns that Hindu nationalists were "trying to purge all manifestations of anti-national thought". —Reuters

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