

A BEHEADING ALONG THE LINE OF CONTROL

Newsbreak

Sunday, January 6th, 2013

As is usual for a Sunday, it was a slow moving news day. The headlines in the newspapers on that cold winter morning were routine. In the NDTV newsroom, most reports were carried over from the previous night. At 9.39 am, an email from NDTV's Zaffar Iqbal, based in Srinagar, the capital of the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir, landed at the news desk. It read:

"Ceasefire violation in Uri sector of Kashmir. Pakistan army resorted to unprovoked firing on Indian posts near village Churunda close to LoC (Line of Control). Pakistan fired mortar shells and illumination shots. Many shells landed close to the village. Panic has gripped the villagers who fear casualties and damage to property. Firing started at 3.30 am, possibly to help infiltration. Alert troops retaliated and forced Pakistani troops to stop firing."

The details were flashed as "Just In," on the scroll running at the bottom of the screen. As the person in charge of the coverage of the channel across the security spectrum, Nitin Gokhale was also copied on the email. The news desk asked Gokhale for more details which were difficult to ascertain during the initial hours. The Indian Army's Public Information setup in New Delhi confirmed Zaffar's inputs around 11.30 am.

The next bulletin was at 1 pm in which the incident was reported with more details, with Zaffar explaining the situation and circumstances under which the firing and the subsequent retaliation happened. In the absence of further details, by afternoon, the news from Jammu & Kashmir had been relegated to the tail end of the bulletins.

In the evening, a report from Islamabad quoted the Pakistani army's allegation that one of its soldiers was killed and another injured. State-run *Radio Pakistan* quoted a military spokesman as saying that two Pakistani

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soldiers were wounded and one of them later succumbed to his injuries in an incident on the LoC.

Army Headquarters in New Delhi, however, said "No such incident has taken place where our soldiers have attacked any Pakistani post." Indian Army sources suggested that this allegation by the Pakistani army appeared to be an attempt to cover up its firing on Indian posts in the Uri sector.

By late evening on Sunday, January 6th, the LoC incident had dropped off the news bulletins on Indian news channels.

Ceasefire

India and Pakistan routinely accuse each other of triggering incidents on the LoC and violating the ceasefire that was officially agreed to in November 2003.

Describing the ceasefire, the *Los Angeles Times* had said on November 26, 2003: "Taking a significant step to end one of the world's most dangerous conflicts, nuclear-armed rivals India and Pakistan agreed to a cease-fire Tuesday aimed at halting 14 years of cross-border gun battles in the disputed Kashmir region."

The ceasefire's prospects were uncertain because it did not cover the militants who often launched deadly raids from Pakistan into Indian-held territory. One analyst described the accord, which restricts the countries' conventional armies from attacking each other, as more "symbolic than substantive."¹ Despite the scepticism with which the ceasefire agreement was initially viewed, nearly a decade later, both New Delhi and Islamabad continue to officially observe it, at least on paper.

On ground however the situation is slightly different. Every year since 2003, violations have occurred regularly. Both sides, however, have kept their cool. In 2010, in the Poonch sector, some 400 km from Uri, south of the Pir Panjal mountain range that separates the Kashmir valley from the Jammu area, a similar violation was reported. It was no different in 2012. The ceasefire notwithstanding, attempts by the militants to sneak across the heavily guarded LoC continued. Often Pakistani regular forces fire on Indian posts to

¹<http://articles.latimes.com/2003/nov/26/world/fg-ceasefire26>, accessed on 3 March 2013

facilitate the infiltration of the heavily armed militants trained and hosted in camps close to the LoC on the Pakistani side. In 2012, 117 ceasefire incidents were reported. In 2011 the figure was slightly lower.

For 2013, the incident at Churunda, near Uri was officially the first ceasefire violation on the Line of control. Given the regularity with which these violations occurred, no one was giving much attention to them. In two days, this was to change drastically.

On Monday, January 7th, Zaffar sent photographs of the damage caused to houses in Churunda village because of the cross-border firing. Indian Army's claims about Pakistani firing seemed to be borne out of photographs shared by villagers.

The question of beheading

Tuesday, January 8th

The headlines in Tuesday's morning papers were routine.

At 1 pm, Gokhale got a call from one of his sources. "There seems to be an incident on the LoC, " the caller said. "No details are available yet but check at your end." Thirteen minutes later, queries started appearing on Gokhale's Facebook page and Twitter timeline: "Have you heard of two Indian soldiers being killed? Of a beheading?" The usual sources to answer the questions were out of reach or not responding.

Within the hour, Gokhale was flooded with details on social media stating with certainty that one Indian soldier had been beheaded. Some of them were from former soldiers; some wives of serving soldiers and some (on Twitter) anonymous followers. They were incredulous why mainstream media journalists like Gokhale were fighting shy of mentioning the barbaric act.

Gokhale managed to get through to Lt Col Rajesh Kalia, the Public Relations Officer (PRO) of Indian Army's Northern Command, at 3pm. The latter confirmed the killing of 2 Indian soldiers but said he had nothing more to elaborate or share at that point. Pressed for more details, he said he would get back with details. Half an hour later, Zaffar, who was in Jammu, told Gokhale he was sure of the beheading but was unable to reach any one in the Army for confirmation.

Gokhale worked the phone again, calling up contacts in Northern Command, the Army HQ and whoever else he could reach in the *fauj* but found no confirmation of any beheading. By now the trickle of information in cyberspace had turned into a torrent. Individuals on social media turned hostile and abusive.

That evening at 5pm, Zafar and Gokhale went on air with the information that two Indian soldiers had indeed been killed after a suspected cross-border raid in the Poonch area of the LoC, and had their weapons snatched. They did not mention beheading. Gokhale said that they still didn't know the circumstances under which the soldiers had been killed, and asked whether they were waylaid by the Pakistanis, strayed from their usual route or were killed by some other means.

Barkha Dutt, NDTV's senior editor and anchor in New Delhi, and Zaffar in Jammu were also checking with their sources for at least one official confirmation of the beheading. The outrage over the beheading of the Indian soldiers was evident on the internet. Some news channels had already started posing a question - "Indian soldier beheaded?"

At 6:30pm, a senior officer at the Army Headquarters reluctantly admitted that the body of one soldier was mutilated, but did not confirm that it was beheaded. Gokhale's colleagues stuck to 'mutilation' in absence of an official admission.

In the next 90 minutes, despite being aware of what had happened, lack of official confirmation meant that Gokhale could only circle around the fact by saying that they had heard of this but had no official confirmation.

The beheading was finally confirmed at 8:05 pm, by a senior officer in Northern Command. who declined to be quoted. Soon after, Gokhale went on air, confirming the beheading. The senior officer said he didn't want to give out details of the beheading lest it demoralise the troops.

A formal statement by India's Ministry of Defence (MoD) also refrained from giving any details of the incident or talking about the beheading. It simply said: "The government of India considers the incident as a provocative action and we condemn it. DGMOs of the two countries are in touch over it. The government will take up the incident with the Pakistan Government. We expect Islamabad to honour the ceasefire agreement strictly."

The very fact that the MoD thought it fit to issue a statement when in most situations, it does not react to incidents on the LoC, clearly indicated the pressure under which the government was at that time. Primetime discussions on Indian news channels were dominated by this issue. There were various theories and speculation about the way the soldiers were killed.

Incident

Gokhale had learnt that the two soldiers from a Rajputana Rifles regiment deployed on the LoC were part of a 10-man party carrying out a routine patrol ahead of the fencing. The weather was foggy and cold and the visibility was extremely low. The patrol, pacing along the border, was however well inside the LoC and was used to these conditions. No one, least of all the Commanding Officer of the unit would have expected any trouble.

The fact was that the soldiers had been killed. The initial assessment was that the two soldiers got separated from the main patrol party and were attacked by a Special Forces team from the Pakistani army which intruded about 100 metres into Indian territory and beheaded one of the soldiers.

A former Indian army chief, General Ved Prakash Malik, appearing on *NDTV's* primetime show "Left Right and Centre", said: "This is a very grave incident. How can the Indian army tolerate this? It had to be well planned, no one can just come across the LoC like that? I am worried about feeble Indian response."

On the 10pm show, Salman Khurshid, India's Minister for External Affairs, struck a cautious note: "Action will be taken after careful consideration. We will take a final call on suitable action tomorrow." He added that "The attack is an attempt to derail the dialogue process with Pakistan," and said "We shouldn't play with fire unnecessarily."

As late evening dissolved into night, an anonymous Pakistan military official was quoted by *Asian News International (ANI)* as saying: "This is Indian propaganda to divert attention from Sunday's (January 6th) raid on Pakistan post by Indian troops which killed a Pakistani soldier."

Outcry

Wednesday, January 9th

The next day's newspapers headlines were naturally dominated by the border incident. *Indian Express* reported: "In a gruesome attack, Pakistani troops today crossed into Indian territory and ambushed an Army patrol party killing two soldiers whose heads were reportedly then chopped off. The attack took place along the Line of Control (LoC) in Poonch district when Pakistanis came about 100 metres into Indian territory and assaulted the patrol party. Besides killing two Lance Naiks, Hemraj and Sudhakar Singh, they also injured two other soldiers. During the brutal assault on the patrol party, the Pakistanis are said to have chopped off their heads, one of which they carried with them, informed sources said. However, the Army, while confirming the killing of Indian soldiers, did not comment on reports that they had been beheaded. According to the sources, the Border Action Team (BAT) of Pakistani Army entered the Indian territory at Krishna Ghati area of Poonch district and carried out the strikes. Army's Udhampur-based Northern Command came out with a statement terming the attack as a "significant escalation" to the continuing series of ceasefire violations and infiltration attempts supported by Pakistan Army."

Significantly, the newspaper noted that the Army had officially not yet confirmed that one of the two killed soldiers was beheaded.

Manish Tewari, Minister for Information & Broadcasting, said "Pakistan must respect rules of engagement and the ceasefire agreement. How can we tolerate mutilation of our braves? Redlines must be drawn." He however did not specify what the red lines would be. Neither did he mention anything about any change in New Delhi's stand on India-Pakistan dialogue.

Meanwhile, the bodies of the two soldiers were being taken to the military hospital in Rajouri before being sent to their homes. In New Delhi, reporters were getting to hear that the Pakistani High Commissioner would be summoned to the foreign ministry and handed a protest note.

That morning, Gokhale got the addresses and contact numbers of the families of the two slain soldiers. His team arranged for the TV crew to move to Mathura, Uttar Pradesh and Sidhi, Madhya Pradesh. The initial information was that the bodies would come to the Rajputana Rifles Centre in Delhi

Cantonment before being taken to Mathura and then to their respective villages.

Defence Minister AK Antony seldom gives interviews. That morning he told reporters: "Pakistan's actions are inhuman and provocative. DGMO (Director General) of both sides will speak. We will register a strong protest."

Thus, three ministers had spoken from the Indian side but none of them had gone beyond the usual speaking points.

That afternoon, Pakistan's High Commissioner Salman Bashir arrived at South Block (that houses both the defence and external affairs ministries) and met Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai. The MEA issued a statement which read: "Foreign Secretary, Shri Ranjan Mathai summoned Pakistan High Commissioner to the Ministry of External Affairs today and lodged a strong protest on the actions of the Pakistan army on January 8, 2013. Regular Pakistan troops crossed the Line of Control at Mendhar sector and engaged the Indian troops who were patrolling this sector. Two Indian soldiers were killed in the attack and their bodies subjected to barbaric and inhuman mutilation. The Government of Pakistan was asked to immediately investigate these actions that are in contravention of all norms of international conduct and ensure that these do not recur. Foreign Secretary recalled that the experts of both countries had met in New Delhi on December 27, 2012 to discuss conventional CBMs, wherein maintaining the sanctity of the LOC, one of the most important CBMs between the two countries, was emphasized."

For the first time the incident was confirmed in a written statement.

Twenty minutes later, Mr Khurshid spoke to the media and said, "Whatever has happened should not be escalated. Cannot and must not allow escalation." The point to note here was no escalation.

A few hours later, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar told CNN-IBN's Suhasini Haider that she was "A bit appalled at the statements coming in from India. Two days back (our soldier) Lance Naik Aslam was killed because of Indian firing 400 metres inside the border. We followed normal course of action."

Almost simultaneously, Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) issued a statement rejecting India's charges but suggested a probe by a United Nations body. The statement in parts read, "Pakistan is prepared to hold

investigations through the United Nations Military Observes Group for India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) on the recent ceasefire violations on the Line of Control”.

That evening, reporters reached the beheaded soldier's village near Mathura. One of his neighbours spoke on camera. "What pride, especially when our young jawans are getting killed, injustice and torture is happening? This is the first time that their heads have been cut. The Government is not paying any heed. There will be 2-3 days of moving papers around. TV and media may carry for a few days then nothing. If this happens then the poor farmers and labourers will not send their young to the army. They may beg instead to feed their family. There may be no interest in going to the front."

At 8 pm the Army sources confirmed that the Special Services Group, a commando unit of the Pakistani Army was certainly involved in the raid. Details of what the DGMO told his Pakistani counterpart also emerged: that these killings were unacceptable and that Pakistan would have to face serious consequences if it they were repeated. Ground commanders told reporters that the battalion (15 Rajputana Rifles) will have to regain its honour.

Around the same time, *Reuters* put out a story from Jammu quoting the army spokesman, stating that the body of one of the soldiers was found mutilated in a forested area on the side controlled by India. Col Kalia, the army spokesman, however denied other reports of one body being decapitated and the other with its throat slit. Regular Pakistan troops crossed the LoC and engaged with an Indian patrol party.

The line from India's MEA was that two Indian soldiers had been killed in the attack "and their bodies subjected to barbaric and inhuman mutilation."

Foreign minister Salman Khurshid sought to cool tensions, warning that exhaustive efforts to improve relations could be squandered if the situation was not contained. This created further confusion. When Gokhale contacted the Northern Command spokesperson, he clarified that his quote that *Reuters* used was the one he gave the reporter in the first hour of the crisis on January 8th and therefore misleading since at that time the entire picture wasn't available.

Col Kalia's clarification to *Reuters* notwithstanding, the *Reuters* report was picked up by Pakistani and other international media outlets claiming a contradiction in the Indian narrative.

Meanwhile cross-LoC trade at Poonch was halted following the tension but at Uri where the initial exchange of fire had taken place, trucks crossed over as usual.

In a related development, Indian Army Chief General Bikram Singh, scheduled to meet young men and women of the National Cadet Corps (NCC) in Delhi Cantonment on January 10th, barred the media from entering the camp during his visit, setting off speculation that he was avoiding the media.

A twist in the tale

Thursday, January 10th

A completely different take on the tension at the LoC came from Praveen Swami, a well-regarded national security correspondent and editor of *The Hindu's* New Delhi bureau:

“Indian bunker construction on the northern reaches of the Line of Control — initiated after a grandmother crossed into Pakistan-administered Kashmir to be with her sons — sparked off a spiral of violence which culminated in the brutal killing of two soldiers in an ambush earlier this week, highly placed military and government sources have told *The Hindu*.

The clashes, among the worst on the Line of Control since a ceasefire went into place, have provoked fears that the ceasefire may melt down. In India, news that the two soldiers were beheaded has provoked widespread outrage and calls for large-scale military retaliation.

However, the officials who spoke to *The Hindu* had a very different account — of how a relatively innocuous incident spiralled into a series of murderous clashes, before culminating in the killing of Lance-Naik Sudhakar Singh and Lance-Naik Hemraj. Both armies,

the officials said, engaged in aggressive action, driven by the still-fraught situation on the Line of Control.

Early in September, 70-year old Reshma Bi, left the village of Charonda, near Uri, to live with her sons and grandchildren across the Line of Control.

Ms. Reshma and her husband Ibrahim Lohar, a highly-placed military source said, had remained in Charonda after their sons crossed into Pakistan-administered Kashmir several years ago, to escape police investigations of their alleged role in cross-border trafficking. Police officers contacted by *The Hindu* said that Ms. Reshma appeared to have left in the hope of living out her last years with her family.

Ms. Reshma's September 11 flight, a senior Srinagar-based military official said, set off alarms at the Uri-headquartered 19 infantry brigade. There, the incident was seen as highlighting vulnerabilities in defences along this stretch of the Line of Control. Charonda is located within metres of the Line of Control, outside of the three-layer counter-infiltration fencing which runs along the frontier.

Inside of a week after Ms. Reshma's departure, troops of the 9 Maratha Light Infantry began constructing observation bunkers around Charonda, seeking to monitor the movement of villagers.

The construction work — barred by the terms of the Line of Control ceasefire which India and Pakistan agreed on in 2003 — provoked furious protests from Pakistani troops. Indian commanders, the military source said, conceded that the construction was in violation of the ceasefire.

However, they refused to stop work, arguing that the posts faced out towards the village, posing no threat to Pakistan. Early in October, the official said, tensions began to escalate. Pakistan even made announcements over a public address system, demanding that Indian troops end the construction work."

The story, which appeared to blame an aggressive commander on the LoC having sparked off the latest confrontation, had a mixed reaction. Some

believed it, some didn't. It did, however, take the sting out of India's stand. By afternoon the Indian Army had punched holes in Mr Swami's story.

Through the day there were intermittent statements, some fresh exchange of fire at the LoC but overall it was getting back to business. India's request for a flag meeting at Poonch received no response from Pakistan yet.

Hot and Cold

Saturday, January 12th

Reporters confronted Air Chief Marshal N A K 'Charlie' Browne, India's air chief, while he was visiting the NCC Cadets' camp in New Delhi. As Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC), he was forceful and candid, without sounding like a warmonger. "We have a Line of Control, we have a ceasefire agreement, we have certain structures and mechanisms which are sacrosanct and any violation of these with impunity especially what has been happening in the last few months is totally unacceptable." He further went onto say "We are monitoring the situation carefully because if these things continue to be the way they are and these violations continue to take place, then perhaps we may have to look at some other options for compliance".

The Air Chief's statement coupled with reports of another infiltration attempt at Mendhar set off another round of heated discussions on the evening's TV programmes.

Monday, January 14th

In the course of his annual press conference, Army Chief General Bikram Singh gave out the details and warned Pakistan. He said "I expect my commanders on the LoC to be aggressive and offensive." He also admitted that in July 2011 a similar incident of beheading of two soldiers from 20 Kumaon battalion had taken place but denied that the Army had tried to suppress it.

Those who had come to know of the July 2011 incident almost 10 days after it had occurred could not pursue it since neither the Army nor the families would confirm it. Subsequently there were unconfirmed and unsubstantiated reports about the Pakistani government having lodged a protest against

beheading of three of their own soldiers. (In Gokhale's limited capacity of research, he had not come across any official report about this in 2011 in either Indian or Pakistani media.) The talks about this incident are persistent and continue to this day. On January 19th, 2013 the wife of one of the Kumaoni soldiers told a reporter: "*Hemraj ke sath jo hua wo hamare sath bhi hua per hamen sarkar ne sammaan nahi diya* (what happened with Hemraj also happened with us, but we were not honoured by the government)"

(Dinesh Mansera, *NDTV's* reporter in Uttarakhand, had reported the matter in July 2011 but only in an oblique manner since at that time the family did not want this incident to come out. Whether the Army prevailed over the family not to speak about it or because other reasons is not yet clear.)

At that moment, though it was not clear how this seemingly new development was being addressed by the Army. The Army Chief's tough language was expected after the Air Chief had set the ball rolling. The MEA in the meantime was trying to downplay the incident through safe and conciliatory statements.

A business unusual

Tuesday, January 15th

After taking salute at the Army Day parade, Northern Army Commander Lt Gen K T Parnaik held his traditional press conference at Akhnoor and reiterated the tough message that India reserved the right to retaliate at the place and time of its own choosing. Later in the evening, he gave a lengthy interview to *Times Now's* Arnab Goswami and recounted the entire incident in some detail.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his senior cabinet colleagues arrived at the army reception 10 minutes before President Pranab Mukherjee was to arrive. Dutt was among a handful of journalists at the reception. Seeing the prime minister, she walked towards him and asked him how he read the situation at LoC? He replied, "It can't be business as usual." Other reporters too surrounded the prime minister and got the same response.

Mr Khurshid held a hurriedly convened press conference a few hours later and said, "It should not be felt that the brazen denial and a lack of proper response from the government of Pakistan to our repeated demarches on this

incident will be ignored and that bilateral relations could be unaffected or that there will be business as usual." Indian political leadership was finally in sync with the military's stand.

That night in a fresh exchange of firing, one Pakistani soldier was apparently killed.

Standing down

Wednesday, January 16th

At 10 am, the Pakistani army's Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) called up his Indian counterpart and protested the killing of its soldier. More importantly, the Pakistani officer informed his Indian counterpart that orders had been passed to his troops to exercise restraint and observe the ceasefire strictly. Both reached an understanding that the situation should not be allowed to escalate. So ended the latest flashpoint between India and Pakistan, at least temporarily.

Why did this story acquire the salience it did? Gokhale's conclusion is that in today's world of easy communications, nothing remains hidden. The situation has changed even compared to two years ago. Soldiers possess mobile phones, officers, ex-servicemen and their families are on social media. They discuss the 'soft' line taken by sections of the government. Details of incidents come out in flash, as they did on January 6th and 8th. No one is able to control the information flow. While some mainstream media outlets wait for official confirmation before breaking news, social media has no such compulsion. Mainstream media thus comes under pressure.

The behaviour of the actors is conditioned by this pressure. So decisions oscillate between one extreme and the other both in the media and the government. It is this challenge, Gokhale feels, that governments and media outlets will have to confront now.

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