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Military Activity is Destroying the Siachen Glaciers

CRSS Board of Trustees' member, Arshad H. Abbasi, an environmental expert, raises pertinent points on the destruction of the Siachen Glaciers, the largest in the world outside of the Polar regions.

Situated on the strategic tri-junction of India, China and Pakistan, the glacier is considered a climate regulator and an "ecological source" for South Asia, says Abbasi. Dubbed the world's highest battleground, at 21,000 feet above sea level, the 77-kilometre-long glacier has been melting rapidly due to military presence in the region. Since 1984, India and Pakistan have been laying claim to the ice mass, where fighting between the two states has been going on intermittently since April 1984. Troops on both sides have played irrevocable havoc with the region's biodiversity, ecology and hydrology, says Abbasi, former director of the Planning Commission of Pakistan and now advisor to the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, a policy-oriented, research institute based in Islamabad.

Experts say human-induced climate change has contributed significantly to alarming changes in climate patterns that, among others, are affecting the rate at which glaciers melt, triggering a wave of natural disasters such as increased incidence of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis. According to estimates, about 200 tones of carbon dioxide are released into the atmosphere daily due to burning of fuel for the sustenance of the troops and transportation of war material by land and air. Both

India and Pakistan spend a million dollars a day to maintain their troops at Siachen — an enormous amount that, experts say, can go a long way to fight poverty and hunger that beset both countries.

Three percent of the casualties between the two forces fighting over the glacier are due to hostile fighting; the rest are attributed to the altitude, weather and avalanches. Calling the Siachen conflict a war between the glacier and humans, not one between India and Pakistan, Abbasi says the 97 percent casualties point to that, because a majority of soldiers sustain frostbite and injuries caused by accidents arising from snowstorms and other natural causes, and very rarely from crossfire. In an interview with IPS, Abbasi explains why the only war worth fighting is protecting the glacier and preserving the fragile ecology of the glacial ice, which may not be there for too long for the two sides to continue fighting over.

Q: How and when did you begin calling for the demilitarization of the Siachen Glacier?

A: It began when I received the first satellite imagery (of the Himalayan glaciers) and compared it with the status of the glacial mass in 1978. The most significant ice-mass loser was Siachen. I shared the images with the director-general of the Meteorological Department, who told me that the glacier was overburdened by the armies of both countries (India and Pakistan).

Q: Why is the melting of Siachen catastrophic for the South Asian region?

A: In the last 25 years, the glacier has been reduced to 35 percent and is retreating three dimensionally, thinning vertically at an alarming rate, as well as retreating horizontally, at approximately more than 100 metres per year. The melting of Siachen and other glaciers due to this (India-Pakistan) conflict is already causing variance in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, but its worst impact on global sea level rise remains underestimated and understudied. Rising sea level is the most serious threat to the populations living on and along the coast.

Q: Is it unprecedented compared to other glaciers in the Himalayas?

A: Yes, the recession is unprecedented when you compare it to other neighboring Himalayan glaciers like Bara Shigri, Gangotri and Chhota Shigri.

Q: Can you cite the factors that have contributed to the accelerated melting of the Siachen glacier?

A: Permanent base camps on the glacier, cantonments in its vicinity, hourly helicopter flights to retrieve wounded or sick soldiers and dropping off supplies, dumping military garbage and human waste, laying of 120-km-long oil pipeline for heating igloos, keeping rifles warm over kerosene stoves, melting the snow for machine guns by keeping them in boiling water, construction of bunkers by cutting and melting glacial ice millions of years old by sprinkling chemicals and (using) mechanical methods; and using glaciers as roads to reach the last base camps – Kamar and Indra – (these are) causing severe environmental degradation to the glacier.

Q: What to your mind is the solution to the pillaging of the Siachen Glacier?

A: Urgent demilitarization by negotiating an honorable withdrawal and ban on mountaineering and other development activities near glacier regions. This would be the greatest relief for the Siachen and other Himalayan glaciers as direct human interference will come to a halt. The daily, rather hourly, aviation activities will be over. The glaciers would again grow or at least remain stable.

Q: The idea of a Siachen science park and a peace zone has been floated for years. What is your take on it?

A: I only support the idea of preservation of glaciers but not that of a science park. In Antarctica, since the last many decades, scientists conducting research from different nations have so far failed to develop any technique to preserve glaciers. On the other hand, their presence has made the continent vulnerable and (the glacier) is melting at an accelerated rate.

Q: You were present at the three-day Track-II Dialogue on Conflict Resolution and Peace Building (held in Bangkok on Oct. 7 to 9) between the two adversaries in Bangkok. Was there anything significant discussed there that gave you hope?

A: In the Pak-India track II dialogue, demilitarization of the Siachen glacier was discussed. Major Gen Dipankar Banerjee, who served in Siachen, is taking a keen interest to convince Indian policymakers to save this glacier from melting. Other experts on both sides also held similar views. Preserving the Siachen and other Himalayan glaciers, they said, was in the best interest of both countries and the world at large. It is time civil society, independent researchers and media, from both sides began pressing their respective governments to save and preserve the glaciers, especially the Siachen. I would also urge both sides to get an independent audit of the glacial ice-balance to compare what it was back, say, in 1984, with (what it is) now to get an idea of the damage caused (by military presence at Siachen).