

Life on the edge: Border units lack basic amenities

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Action sought:

A parliamentary panel has recommended that clean drinking water be supplied to ITBP personnel. Troops in outposts need access to clean water, electricity. It is a truism that a not-so-healthy and ill-equipped force cannot guard a nation's borders properly. Nearly 82% of Border Outposts (BOPs) of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), deployed along the inhospitable and rugged China border, do not have access to clean drinking water. Over 40% are unconnected by road, according to submissions made by the Home Ministry before a parliamentary committee. Shocked? There's more. There are 177 BOPs of the ITBP, of which only 24% have a regular supply of electricity. The rest (76%) are dependent on generators.

Presented to RS

These revelations are part of the 214th Report on 'Working Conditions in Border Guarding Forces (Assam Rifles, Sashastra Seema Bal, Indo Tibetan Border Police and Border Security Force)', running into 137 pages and presented to the Rajya Sabha on December 12.

The report was compiled by a committee headed by Congress leader P. Chidambaram, comprising 29 parliamentarians from both the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha.

It was generated after the committee, at its meeting held on October 24, 2017, decided to examine 'working conditions in Central armed police forces.' The findings reveal major chinks in the country's security armour. As per the government policy of "One Border One Force," the entire stretch along the 3,488 km China border was assigned to the ITBP in 2004, replacing Assam Rifles in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh for border guarding duties.

Water from rivulets

"The Committee is surprised to observe that in 82% of the [ITBP] BOPs, drinking water is obtained from rivulets and springs which are polluted... at some places the level of contamination is alarming. Clean drinking water is a fundamental right". "The Committee strongly recommends that proper provisions be made to make clean and safe drinking water available to the ITBP personnel in all the BOPs," the report said. "Wherever feasible, the

possibility of supplying piped regular drinking water to BOPs must be explored. This must be done immediately and a special report submitted within six months,” it added. A senior ITBP official, however, explained that only 20% BOPs are located at a height of 16,000 feet above sea level, where the water from natural sources can be said to be safe for drinking. “The remaining BOPs are located at 9,000-15,000 feet. As you come down, the water gets dirty. Mostly we sieve the ice to get water, which is then boiled and made potable. In Arunachal Pradesh, there is a variety of banana that grows in forests which contaminates the soil and ground water leading to liver diseases,” the official said.

Height of Sickness

Quoting the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), the report said ITBP personnel are at risk of several high altitude health hazards. According to MHA data, in the past three years alone, over 500 were said to be suffering from High Altitude Pulmonary Edema (HAPO), Acute Cerebral Edema and loss of memory. There were over 400 personnel suffering from snow blindness and trench foot. “The Ministry further informed the Committee that the average recovery time for HAPO, Acute Cerebral Edema, loss of memory is six to 12 months. The average recovery time for trench foot and snow blindness is seven to 15 days,” the report said. According to a study done by the ITBP, approximately 20% of personnel were suffering from high altitude induced hypertension.

Not enough Medics

Moreover, the Committee observed that there was a large number of vacancies in the medical the report said team and this has adversely impacted the forces. “At a time when the ITBP personnel suffer from various diseases, the vacancy of eight specialist medical officers and 93 medical officers is quite alarming. There is no reason why there should be such a large number of vacancies at any given point of time, especially for ITBP as it has no other medical access at all because of the area of its deployment and inaccessible terrain,” the report said. Border roads are critical for security. But only 32 out of 73 roads along the China border are complete, even as ITBP has proposed to construct 96 more roads, according to the Ministry’s admission.

Ill-equipped force

Basic training and right equipment are fundamental to any fighting force. The Committee pulled up the Government for not providing basic training equipment to the ITBP personnel. “The Committee is extremely anguished to note that the ITBP who have been deployed in the treacherous hills of the north against extreme weather on the India-China border since the year 2004, have not been equipped with basic training gadgets and facilities, viz., modern equipment like eight-lane firing simulator and interactive touch display. The Committee feels that the modernization of the Force must be given utmost priority as this Force not only has to face any enemy from across the border but also vagaries of nature,” the report said.

To exacerbate, the condition of BOPs of Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) deployed along the Nepal and Bhutan border was also not up to the mark. The Ministry, in its background note submitted that most of the units in the SSB do not have adequate supply of electricity; 328 out of 636 BOPs did not have access to electricity and were dependent on solar sets or generators. In 2016-17, as many as 6,590 SSB personnel were affected by water-borne diseases like enteric fever, diarrhoea and viral hepatitis. “The Committee observes that around 134 out of 643 BOPs

of SSB do not have any type of water filtration system and seem to rely on whatever quality of water is available to them. The Committee is anguished to note that clean drinking water is not available to the SSB personnel posted at more than 20% of the BOPs and considers this as a failure of the Ministry of Home Affairs to provide adequate basic amenities to CAPF personnel. The high incidence of waterborne diseases, with more than 3,000 cases every year, is evidence of this failure,” the report said. Incidentally the ITBP is 89,433 and SSB 97,014 personnel strong. That’s no small force.