

International

Fighting the elements, not the enemy on India-China border

Brutal hand-to-hand battle with fists, rocks kills 20 Indians

NEW DELHI: Death is a real and constant danger for the soldiers serving on India's Himalayan border with China, but until a deadly brawl on June 15 the only killers since 1975 have been the topography and the elements. "We get more than 100 casualties every year just due to terrain, weather conditions, avalanches... There is constant danger," said retired Lt General DS Hooda, who until 2016 headed India's Northern Command.

"You're talking about 14-15,000 feet. It takes a huge toll on your physical and mental condition," Hooda told AFP after Monday's brutal hand-to-hand battle with fists, rocks and clubs which saw the first Indian combat deaths with China in over four decades. In the "cold desert" of the Galwan river valley in the Ladakh region where the fighting took place, winter temperatures can plunge below minus 30 Celsius (minus 22 Fahrenheit), cracking gun barrels and seizing up machinery.

There are few roads so troops - who are fed a special high-protein diet - must slog through the thin air themselves, carrying their own equipment as they navigate treacherous terrain. For those who get injured or fall sick "evacuation becomes an enormous challenge," Hooda said. Getting them to a helipad "can take hours", and as soon as night falls, it's too dangerous for helicopters to fly. This may be why the initial death toll of three shot up to 20 late on Tuesday. Seventeen other troops critically injured in the clashes, which lasted until after midnight, were "exposed to sub-zero temperatures in the high altitude terrain" and succumbed to their injuries, the army said.

Cold and confused

The terrain is so high that soldiers need time to ac-

climatize to their new posting or they run the risk of serious altitude sickness that can kill even a healthy young person in hours. "For an average human being who is not a resident of that place, survival in itself is a huge challenge," said Colonel S Dinny, who until 2017 commanded an Indian battalion in the region, told AFP. "It is one of the toughest places to serve as a soldier," he said.

Normally soldiers do a two-year posting there, broken up by periods of leave. Those who smoke quickly kick the habit. "With such low oxygen plus the weather plus the smoking, the chances of getting a heart attack shoot up," Dinny added. The cold and the high altitude affects eyesight, adding to troops' disorientation. Weather, which can change quickly with little warning, and the hilly terrain can impair radio communication. Adding to the confusion is the fact that the "Line of Actual Control" (LAC) isn't properly demarcated, meaning that Indian and Chinese troops can bump into each other and believe the other side has trespassed.

"The maps have not even been exchanged so that the other person knows what someone is claiming. There are no boundary markers," said Dinny. To avoid escalations, both sides have over the years developed detailed protocols on the procedures to follow - while also agreeing that neither side shall open fire. If rival patrols bump into each other, they keep their distance and unfurl banners warning each other they have left their territory and should turn back. Apart from occasional flare-ups, when they meet, the troops conduct themselves like "professional soldiers serving their respective countries, they treat each other with that courtesy," Dinny said.



GAGANGIR: An Indian Border Security Force (BSF) soldier guards a highway leading towards Leh, bordering China, as villagers carry firewood in Gagangir. — AFP

Punch-ups

But in recent months confrontations have increased with both sides building up troops and infrastructure. China appears to have been particularly irked by India building a new road. China, according to New Delhi, is encroaching further into new areas, including some of the northern shore of the Pangong Tso lake and the Galwan valley which China now lays

claim to in its entirety. In May there were two punch-ups before the deadly clash in June which reportedly saw Chinese troops attack the Indians with nail-studded batons, rocks and fists. "It is time we revisit our protocol and our rules of engagement so that any disagreements can be handled in a more military fashion rather than fighting it out like goons on the street," Hooda said. — AFP

Torture video triggers calls for action on domestic violence

MILAN: A video of a man abusing his wife as she stands with her hands tied behind her back has provoked outrage in Kyrgyzstan, where women's rights campaigners called for urgent reform of domestic violence laws. A 52-year-old man has been arrested and charged with torture since the footage, which shows a man slapping his wife and pouring buckets of water on her head, appeared online last week. Two tyres weighted down with bricks are tied around her neck. Hillary Margolis, a senior researcher at Human Rights Watch, said domestic violence was classed as a misdemeanor in Kyrgyzstan, meaning it does not carry jail time, only fines that can impact the entire family. "It is indescribable how upset we all, as society, are," said Janna Araeva, spokeswoman for women's rights group Bishkek Feminist Initiatives.

"We are only hopeful that those people with high positions will FINALLY notice this problem in our society," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by email. Lawmakers in the central Asian country debated legislation to toughen punishments for abusers and other legal changes on Thursday, days after the clip

emerged. The bill is designed to increase the effectiveness of state policy on combating domestic violence, said Ishak Pirmatov, the lawmaker who initiated the legislation. But women's rights advocates said previous efforts to strengthen laws in the former Soviet republic of 6 million had brought little change.

They said the situation was deteriorating amid a resurgence of right-wing ideology, citing multiple cases of forced marriage and domestic violence. Women often face pressure from family members and authorities to reconcile with their partners and withdraw any complaints they might have filed with police, said Margolis. "There seems to still be this sense in society ... that women shouldn't talk about family problems, that it is kind of airing dirty laundry," she said. Reports are sometimes not thoroughly investigated and women's shelters are short of places, she said.

The interior ministry did not immediately reply to a request for comment. On Monday, Bishkek Feminist Initiatives staged a small rally demanding government action that was reportedly broken up by police citing coronavirus restrictions. Vice prime minister Aida Ismailova told an advisory body on women's issues on Sunday that authorities would work to strengthen access to justice and assistance for women who suffer domestic violence. Cases of domestic violence in the first three months of 2020 were up 65% on the same period last year, she said, adding this could be attributed to Covid-19 lockdown measures. — Reuters

Lenin statue to be unveiled in west Germany

FRANKFURT AM MAIN: While a global row rages over the controversial background of historical figures immortalized as statues, yesterday a divisive new monument to Soviet leader Lenin was unveiled in Germany. More than 30 years after the post-World War II communist experiment on German soil ended, the tiny Marxist-Leninist Party of Germany (MLPD) will install Lenin's likeness in the western city of Gelsenkirchen. The MLPD says it is the first such statue ever to be erected on the territory of the former West Germany, decades after the eastern German Democratic Republic communist state and its deadly Berlin Wall and Stasi secret police collapsed.

"The time for monuments to racists, anti-Semites, fascists, anti-communists and other relics of the past has clearly passed," said MLPD chair Gabi Fechter in a statement. By contrast, "Lenin was an ahead-of-his-time thinker of world-historical importance, an early fighter for freedom and democracy," she argued. Not everyone in Gelsenkirchen, a center of the former industrial and mining powerhouse Ruhr region, has welcomed the over two-meter (6.5 feet) likeness of the communist leader originally produced in former Czechoslovakia in 1957.

"Lenin stands for violence, repression, terrorism and horrific human suffering," representatives from mainstream parties

on the district council in Gelsenkirchen-West said in a resolution passed in early March. The council "will not tolerate such an anti-democratic symbol in its district," it added, urging "all legal means" be used to block its installation. But later in March the upper state court in Muenster rejected an attempt to stop the statue that it argued would impact a historic building on the same site. The MLPD has trumpeted interest from as far away as Russia, and is celebrating the unveiling with sausages and cake - while urging guests to maintain social distancing and wear nose and mouth coverings against coronavirus infection.

Paint-splattered Bismarck

The worldwide Black Lives Matter movement following the death of African-American George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis on May 25 has found some echo in Germany. Unknown people splattered red paint on a statue of Otto von Bismarck in Hamburg's Altona district this week.

The "Iron Chancellor" behind Germany's unification in 1871 is also known for hosting the Berlin Conference of 1884, which became a byword for the carving up of Africa between European colonial powers. Berlin itself has been a hub of activism against commemorations in public space of colonialists, with much ire directed at street names honoring 19th-Century figures in the so-called "African Quarter". But political decisions to rename roads named after figures like Adolf Luederitz, a merchant who played a key role in colonizing Namibia, or Carl Peters, a colonialist behind German expansion in eastern Africa, have met with resistance from locals. — AFP

India's PM promotes yoga against COVID

NEW DELHI: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has extolled yoga as a way of building a "protective shield" of immunity against the coronavirus, as his nation battles a surge in infections. Modi, a keen yoga practitioner who has long espoused the benefits of the ancient Indian practice, gave the advice in a YouTube message ahead of World Yoga Day today. "We all know that until now nowhere in the world have they been able to develop a vaccine for COVID-19 or coronavirus," Modi said in the video published Thursday. "Which is why right now, only a strong immunity can act as a protective shield or a bodyguard for us and our family members... yoga is our trusted friend in building this protective shield (of immunity)."

The Indian leader, a teetotal vegetarian, set up a ministry to promote yoga, Ayurveda and other traditional Indian treatments when he came to power in 2014. Modi initially proposed World Yoga Day to the United Nations, winning approval in 2014. The day normally sees masses of people gather for public yoga events not only in India but worldwide but Modi called for people to this year "go indoors". Modi also



NEW DELHI: A man stands along a street in front of a billboard displaying an image of Prime Minister Narendra Modi wearing a scarf as a facemask after the government eased a nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19. — AFP

hailed yoga as a way to ease the extraordinary stresses people are enduring because of the virus. "Yoga has the potential to cater to the mental, physical and psychological challenges. It puts to test how one can live in challenging times," he said.

In January, the Ministry of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, Sowa Rigpa and Homoeopathy) released an advisory on how ancient homeopathy and Ayurveda remedies could

help Indians combat the coronavirus. But experts, including the US' National Institutes of Health, have warned that "no scientific evidence that any of these alternative remedies can prevent or cure COVID-19". India's national and state governments have also stressed the importance of mask-wearing and social distancing. The South Asian nation of 1.3 billion people is the fourth worst-hit country in the world with more than 380,000 virus infections, official figures show. — AFP

China charges two Canadians with spying

OTTAWA: Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Friday he is "disappointed" that China has formally charged two Canadians with spying, more than 18 months after their arrest amid a row between Beijing and Ottawa. Former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor were detained in December 2018, nine days after Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou was arrested in Canada on a US warrant, in what was seen as tit-for-tat retaliation.

"We're of course disappointed with the decision taken by the Chinese in the case of the two Michaels," Trudeau said, renewing calls for their release. His deputy, Chrystia Freeland, said she was "heartbroken and really angry" and called on China to restore consular access for the pair. Canada's former ambassador to China, Guy Saint-Jacques, urged Ottawa to take a more aggressive stance. "We need a strong reaction from the federal government, not just soft diplomatic talk anymore," he told public broadcaster CBC. The Supreme People's Procuratorate said earlier it has begun the prosecution of Kovrig and Spavor, suspected of "foreign espionage" and "providing state secrets."

The move follows a key ruling allowing Meng to be extradited to the US, which wants to try her on fraud charges related to the Chinese telecom giant's alleged violations of US sanctions against Iran. Relations between Canada and China have hit rock bottom over the arrests. Beijing has blocked billions of dollars' worth of Canadian agricultural exports. Trudeau said Chinese au-



In this file photo, Turnisa Matsedik-Qira, of the Vancouver Uyghur Association, demonstrates against China's treatment of Uighurs while holding a photo of detained Canadians Michael Spavor (left) and Michael Kovrig outside a court in Vancouver. — AFP

thorities have "directly linked" the case "to the judicial proceedings against Miss Meng." He called this "extremely disappointing because, for us, there obviously are no links, except in politics."

He vowed with allies to pressure Beijing to "cease the arbitrary detention of these two Canadian citizens who are being held for no other reason than (that) the Chinese government is disappointed with the independent proceedings of the Canadian judiciary," Meng, the eldest daughter of Huawei founder Ren Zhengfei, has been out on bail and living in a mansion in Vancouver. The two Canadians remain in China's opaque penal system. Monthly consular visits for Kovrig and Spavor were suspended mid-January when the coronavirus outbreak hit China. Beijing confirmed Friday that they would not resume until the virus situation improved.

China's foreign ministry has previously

insisted the pair are in good health, held "in a region that is not particularly affected by COVID-19." However, people familiar with the matter have told AFP the two have endured hours of interrogation and during the first six months of detention were forced to sleep with the lights on. Chinese human rights lawyer Li Fangping told AFP their trials would likely be held in secret, with an official lawyer appointed. China's foreign ministry said on Friday the circumstances surrounding the case were "particularly serious... the facts of the crime are clear and the evidence sufficient." Trudeau's foreign minister, Francois-Philippe Champagne, said after the May ruling over Meng that Canada would "continue to pursue principled engagement with China to address our bilateral differences." Champagne said Ottawa also would seek clemency for a third Canadian, Robert Schellenberg, who faces execution on drug charges. — AFP