

INTERVIEW | GENERAL (RETD) J.J. SINGH

## “Roads are crucial for security”

The appointment of former army chief General (ret'd) J.J. Singh as the Governor of the sensitive state of Arunachal Pradesh comes at a crucial juncture in Indo-China ties, particularly since the governor of this state has more powers than his counterparts in other states. In an interview with Assistant Editor SANDEEP UNNITHAN, Singh outlined his plans for one of India's least developed states.

**Q. Can your appointment be seen as the iron glove on a velvet fist?**

A. For me, it is a challenging assignment. A lot has to be done to boost the standard of living of the people of the state. We have to ensure connectivity. The development of Arunachal Pradesh will be my top priority. My role will be to support and guide the state Government in an unobtrusive manner. I want to see that the projects are completed in time and there is law and order.

**Q. There are concerns over the slow pace of infrastructure development on our side of the border.**

A. The projects announced by the prime minister will take between five and 10 years to be completed. I will advise the state Government to initiate projects like the rail link to Itanagar without delay so that people do not feel that they were empty promises. The planned laterals and axis roads will also give us capability from the national security point of view.

**Q. Is the rapid development of infrastructure on China's side of the border worrying?**

A. Our basic aim is to improve the quality of life of the people in the border areas. This will also help national security. The other side is also embarking on projects for the development of their remote provinces. Both sides have their strengths and weaknesses. Our roads have to ascend from 1,000 ft to 20,000 ft above sea



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level but our hinterland is just 150 km from our forward areas, which allows resupply. But the other side has to sustain their lines over 1,000 km away over rugged terrain, where there are bottlenecks. We are not imbalanced as of date on the border and I can assure my countrymen that there won't be a repeat of 1962.

ture. Hence, military resupply to the border is virtually impossible. The Chinese have built all-weather motorable roads on their side of the border, allowing them to speedily insert troops at various points all along the border. The construction of the Golmud-Lhasa railway line has allowed them to overcome the hurdle of rapidly building up and sustaining their troops in Tibet.

In sharp contrast, only two of the Indian posts, Tawang and Kibito, along the 1,080 km McMahon Line dividing Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet, can be reached by road, the rest telescope from jeep tracks to mule tracks and finally into foot tracks. The defence of the sensitive Tawang area depends on a single, slender road. “If the Chinese want to capture Tawang, all they have to do is cut this road off,” says Tapir Gao, MP, Arunachal East. “The state of roads in Arunachal Pradesh has a bearing on national security,” says Singh (see interview). Ministry of Defence officials recognise India's insecurity and signs of China having completed all their prepara-

tions. “They were quietly building up their infrastructure along the borders while we were complacent,” says a senior army official. “With a boundary left undemarcated, the Chinese have been taking advantage of their greater accessibility to continue their acquisition of Indian territory. The Government is yet to consider a proposal to link all the border roads of the state,” says Kiren Rijiju, BJP MP from Arunachal West constituency. Defence Minister A. K. Antony expressed his amazement at China's rapid infrastructure build-up along the border. “It is an eye-opener,” he said, after a recent visit to the international border at Sikkim.

Antony's observations and constant warnings from the security establishment led to the approval of the two new divisions, say army officials. The divisions will be backed by state-of-the-art technology—heavy-lift helicopters, each capable of carrying 50 troops; Howitzers like the 155-mm Bofors, but light enough to be slung under the helicopters; missile and cannon-armed helicopter gunships; utility

helicopters; and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) (see box), all of which will be acquired over the next five years.

The proposal had been pending since the Kargil war in 1999, when the army felt the need to augment its offensive mountain warfare capability. However, the new divisions are meant only for the North-east. Army officials estimate that the first two brigades of the divisions will start coming in this year and will be expanded at the rate of two brigades a year; all the divisions will be fully functional in the next four-to-five years. The army has asked the Government to raise its manpower ceiling for the new divisions by 30,000, from the present 11 lakh, but insiders say it is unlikely. Instead, the army may convert two existing infantry divisions and re-orient them to mountain divisions like it did while raising the new IX Corps in 2005. The question now is how quickly these measures will be realised on the ground. Further delays will only lead to an unacceptable imbalance in the state that the prime minister called “India's land of the rising sun”. ■