

# Straight from the heart

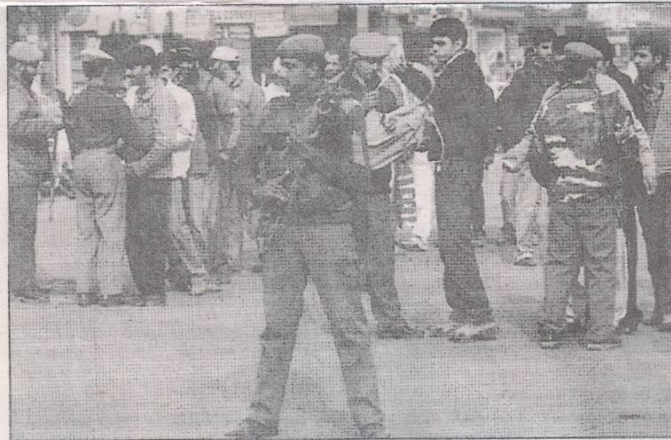
The government needs to make full use of the popular desire for peace in order to combat insurgency, writes J.J. Singh

**D**o the lives and liberty of people caught in a conflict zone such as Assam, Manipur, Jammu and Kashmir, or anywhere else in the world, matter? Are the belligerents, the terrorists or insurgents on the one hand, and the security forces on the other, concerned about the hapless citizens? These are relevant questions which relate to the conduct of sub-conventional warfare. These issues assume vital importance in the 21st century, when human rights organizations and the media act as watchdogs to prevent the abuse of human rights. No state or terrorist outfit can absolve itself of its human rights violations. The events that took place at Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay prisoner camps are well known.

The Indian army has evolved a doctrine of low-intensity conflict that is based on lessons learnt from decades of counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations. A basic tenet of this doctrine is the concept of "the iron fist and the velvet glove". The iron fist denotes a ruthless approach while confronting terrorists, and the velvet glove represents the compassion of the security forces towards citizens in the battle zone.

**N**o counter-insurgency strategy can succeed without the active support of the people. Terrorism in Mizoram and Punjab came to a grinding halt only when the people of these states stopped helping the terrorists. The people are central to such conflicts and all operational strategies should be focused on winning their 'hearts and minds', their support and cooperation. Actions that alienate or demean the population should be scrupulously avoided. After all, they are innocent victims caught between two warring sides.

Winning the hearts and minds of the people and removing the feeling of alienation are necessary for success in any counter-terrorist campaign. One must know and analyse the causes espoused by the terrorist or insurgent. Some of these may be genuine grievances of civilians, which have to



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be addressed by the administrative machinery of the State; others may be false propaganda, which should be exposed by all means available so as to acquaint the people with the reality of the situation.

The majority of the population of such conflict-prone areas are silent fence-sitters. They watch with keen interest the moves of the two sides. Invariably, they lean towards the winning side. Hence, operational strategy and ground-level tactics assume great importance. Professionally conducted operations against terrorists, with little or no collateral damage, would greatly help win over the people.

Assam, Manipur and Kashmir are today witnessing a plethora of terrorist organizations, mostly bereft of any credible ideology. Thus, a decline in public support for them is evident. As a result, the terrorists are resorting to violence and coercion, abduction for revenge or ransom, forcible collection of funds, killing of innocent civilians (suspected of siding with the security forces), and other atrocities including rape and arson.

As it dawns on the people that terrorist organizations have taken them for a ride, the support to terrorism starts drying up, as is happening in

many parts of Assam, Manipur and Kashmir. There is a groundswell for peace and progress. In many cases, parents are convincing the misguided youths to surrender their arms and rejoin the mainstream. They have lost faith in the terrorist cause, and realized the unlikelihood of achieving success through violence. We have to encourage such developments and address issues like the economic rehabilitation of those who surrender, except those involved in heinous crimes.

The army's role is to provide security to civilians and a secure environment for the administrative machinery to execute projects, particularly for the development of remote and inaccessible areas. Therefore, it is vital that the army conduct itself in an impeccable manner and reassure the people that, unlike the terrorists, it is a responsible and accountable force.

India attaches great importance to upholding human rights while conducting counter-terrorist operations. Before soldiers are inducted into such conflict-prone areas, they are first put through intense training, which includes the conduct of operations using minimum force, avoiding collateral damage, and displaying high moral

standards. The Indian army's benchmark of professional conduct is thus spelt out and systematically imbibed by all ranks.

Despite these steps, there are some mistakes committed by the troops on the ground. These are speedily investigated and action is taken against those proved guilty. At the same time, to maintain the army's credibility, action is taken to provide solace, financial aid and other help to the aggrieved families.

Furthermore, to project the humane face of the army and to win over the people, Operation Sadbhavana has been launched through multi-pronged civic-action programmes, which have been a great success. These schemes include women's empowerment, quality education, better health care, community and infrastructure development. The armed forces have also been praised by the people for responding instantaneously whenever a natural calamity has struck these areas, such as earthquakes, floods or heavy snowfall.

**T**he problems in Kashmir, Assam and Manipur are not purely military in nature. If that were so, we could have overcome them by now with the application of superior military power and strategy. There are also political, social, economic and ethical issues involved. The counter-terrorism strategy at the national and state levels must encompass all these dimensions.

It is reassuring to see that violence levels have been considerably reduced by effective operations by the security forces in recent times, and the elected state governments are addressing the other important aspects by a synergized strategy. People have unambiguously given their verdict for peace, and in many cases rejected the diktat of the terrorists. It is good to see Kashmiris holidaying in Gulmarg and Pahalgam after many years, or Assamese and Manipuris leading more peaceful lives. People have realized that more than one generation have lost their entire youth, and they do not want this agony to continue. This opportunity must be seized upon by the Central and state governments to consolidate the gains made, and resolve the problems comprehensively.

The author is former chief of army staff

