

Indian army can never c

BY ANIT MUKHERJEE

During his trip to South Asia, President George W. Bush did his best to whistle past the diplomatic graveyard of Kashmir, issuing only bland encouragements to the leaders of India and Pakistan to resolve the status of the disputed territory. That's a shame, because instead of ignoring Kashmir, Bush and his administration should be studying it as a case study in dealing with an insurgency.

"I joined the insurgents only because of you," the young Kashmiri man told me, sobbing, "because of the way you humiliated me, the way you tormented me. To regain my honor, I picked up the gun." It was one of my moreshock-

ing encounters during my two and a half years of counterinsurgency duties as an Indian Army officer in Kashmir. The self-awareness that inevitably dawns on all soldiers in a combat zone came upon me: I was not a part of the solution; I was the problem, or at least part of the problem.

I had regularly summoned that young man to my post to ask him about militants in my area of responsibility. I singled him out because other villagers had told me that he was in the know. As I subsequently discovered, this information was false, fed to me by the villagers because this boy, from the wrong side of the tracks, had fallen in love with a rich man's daughter. Later, upon his word that he would have noth-

ing more to do with the insurgents, I let him go, promising, in turn, to leave him alone.

During the first year of my counterinsurgency duties, I believe I created more insurgents than I, for want of a better word, eliminated. This was not only because of inexperience, but also because I lacked fundamental knowledge of the terrain, the people, the culture. I also didn't know how to sift through local intelligence effectively.

As a result, I mostly drew on tips and informants who, with hindsight, were mostly unreliable. The motives for giving me this information were usually property and land disputes, family feuds, tribal and ethnic conflicts and other causes unrelated

to the insurgency. Thus, a combination of my own naïveté and enthusiasm, not to mention pressure from senior commanders, resulted in actions that alienated the locals and, inadvertently, helped the insurgency.

It was only after a year of combat operations that I was able to build up my own intelligence network and gain the experience to be effective. Although conventional wisdom says that the tours of duty should be short, in my experience militaries fighting insurgencies should instead keep junior officers in the field for as long as they can. Successful counterinsurgency campaigns have usually been small-team operations led by junior officers with intimate knowledge

Quash Kashmiri struggle

of their areas of responsibility.

After the first year of conducting operations with questionable results, my unit made a significant shift toward people-friendly operations. That meant taking off shoes before searching mosques, deciding not to search old men, women and children and even letting insurgents escape rather than risking a firefight in a built-up area. Over time, our hard work paid off. Tips became more frequent and reliable. As we gained the trust of the locals, we succeeded in preventing recruitment while eliminating insurgents.

As the insurgents in Kashmir lacked the ability to mount conventional attacks, their weapon of choice was the improvised explosive device. Eventually, we

largely neutralized this threat by constantly changing our tactics. By being unpredictable and undertaking intensive offensive operations, admittedly a function of abundant manpower, we seized the initiative and became the hunter rather than the hunted.

One of the few, and rarely noticed, successes of Indian security agencies has been their ability to subvert an insurgency. For example, in Kashmir, Indian intelligence services were able to buy out an entire strand of insurgents in the mid-1990's and create local counterinsurgents called Ikhwanis. For a time, they were extremely effective, and were able to wipe out the local insurgency before the foreign-born jihadis poured into the valley. By

the time we deployed in the valley in 1999, the Ikhwanis themselves had become corrupted and were being phased out. But that experience taught us how critical it was to co-opt the locals into our counterinsurgency strategy.

Undoubtedly, the Indian Army has learned a lot after 16 years in Kashmir, but its experience raises the question - can a military learn without bleeding? The sad answer is no.

Almost four years have passed since I left the Kashmir Valley. Although the conflict gets less public attention, civilians, soldiers and militants still die every day. Despite the seemingly endless daily toll, a few months ago the commander of India's Northern Army at the time, Lieutenant

General Hari Prasad, had the confidence to declare that "normalcy is round the corner."

True, the level of violence in Kashmir has decreased and this augurs well for peace. But the Indian Army has not, and can never, quash the insurgency. On the contrary, one of the first lessons taught to all soldiers deploying in Kashmir is that an insurgency can never be militarily defeated. It can only be managed until a political solution is found - a lesson that the Bush administration would do well to remember.

Anit Mukherjee, a doctoral candidate at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins, served in the Indian Army for nine years.

- The New York Times