

Energy needs in a high altitude conflict zone of India

by Dr Sudhirendar Sharma, 7 Triveni Apartments, A6 Paschim Vihar, New Delhi 110 063, India
Tel: 91-11-5250494 Email: sudhirendar@vsnl.net

Kargil, a district perched atop the Himalayan plateau, at an altitude of over three thousand metres above sea level, has turned out to be a stage for cross-border aggression. It has not only faced two major wars, in 1965 and in 1971, but has been witness to low-intensity cross-border aggression between India and Pakistan for a decade now. However, it was during the armed aggression of May 1999 that the region shot into prominence. But for the conflict, the region would not have been known to the rest of the country.

In January 1999, during a protest rally in favour of their rights in Delhi, India's capital, the activist Raza Abbasi from Kargil recalls that he and his colleagues had to explain to the police the existence of Kargil. Said Raza, 'The war helped the country know that we do exist as part of this nation'. Raza echoed the concern of most Kargilians who were piqued by the lack of concern by the majority for the small community living in this high-altitude region.

Unfortunately, the war was timed (from May to September) to coincide with the most productive summer months for the local pop-

Besoins énergétiques dans une zone en conflit de l'Inde située en haute altitude.

Les conflits armés et les problèmes de réfugiés présentent plusieurs difficultés: d'abord pour les réfugiés eux-mêmes ensuite pour les populations environnantes. La nourriture est un besoin de base, cependant dans les régions froides et isolées, le bois pour le chauffage peut être la principale priorité. Cet article montre comment les organisations d'aide et ultérieurement les organisations de développement doivent tenir compte des ressources et contraintes locales, il esquisse également les réponses à apporter en se fondant sur les modes traditionnels de vie afin de parvenir à un maximum d'auto-suffisance.

ulation, the time during which not only are farming operations accomplished but enough food is stored for the coming winter. Consequently, the impact of war had wider human dimensions too. Though only 30 000 people were directly displaced, the impact of cross-border aggression was felt by the remainder too, as they had given shelter and support to the displaced during this period.

The energy question

Much to everybody's surprise, the affected population in this war-torn region demanded fuelwood as a relief. Normally, one is conditioned to hear requests for 'food' in such situations. It was a new learning experience for outsiders, that survival in such high mountainous areas is dependent on fuelwood. One may survive

the winters without 'food' relief but not without fuelwood to keep oneself alive. No surprise, therefore, that most of the better months of summer are spent on collection of fuelwood.

Since local people had missed out on the opportunity of collecting and storing fuelwood for the winters, fuelwood figured top on the relief package by most relief agencies. The district administration distributed 2000 tonnes of fuelwood while the relief agencies distributed another 1200 tonnes. Clearly, this quantity was nowhere near the actual wood requirements of the affected population for the six winter months.

According to estimates by the Forest Department in the district, the average requirement of wood for a family for the entire winter duration is around three tonnes. By this estimate, the total requirement for the displaced population alone worked out close to 12 000 tonnes. Clearly, the relief package was only starting to address the problem. Private vendors were expected to cover the shortfall. Even during normal conditions, much of the wood supplies are met through private vendors who transport fuelwood from the Kashmir valley. In 1998, 480 truckloads of wood, containing approximately 3.5 tonnes per truck, were sold in the area.

It was quite clear that war or no war, the issue of energy was

Where is Kargil?

Spread over the inaccessible mountainous terrain of the western Ladakh region in the Indian Himalayas, Kargil town lies to the north-west of the Kashmir valley at a distance of 204 kilometres from Srinagar and 234 km from Leh, the capital of Ladakh. It can be reached by road from both Srinagar and Leh, which are linked by air. Stretching like a lunar landscape high in the remote regions of the Karakoram, Kargil town is situated on the banks of the River Suru, at a height of 2830m.

Till 1979, Kargil was part of the erstwhile largest district in the country, Ladakh. Covering 14 036 square kilometres, the district is characterized by sparse vegetation on mountains that range in height from 2500m to 5500m. The district remains snowbound and inaccessible for half the year, from October to April. Its population of over 95 000 people is distributed in 131 villages. Drass, a small town in the west of Kargil, is reputed to be the second coldest inhabited place, with the temperature dipping down to -75°C. Over 90 per cent of the population in the district is Muslim; Buddhists and Hindus constitute small minorities.

paramount for this region. The dependence of the local population on supplies from the valley and the plains make them more vulnerable in the event of unfortunate calamities. With energy being crucial to human and cattle survival in the region, long-term plans need to be developed to tide over the crisis-like situation that crops up year after year.

A unique institution

Mosque is a social institution in Kargil that addresses the problem of energy in its own unique way. Each village has, on an average, two mosques. These mosques provide hot water facilities for bathing during the winter months. Hamams (traditional water heaters) are available in these mosques. Not only do the hamams keep the praying arena warm, but they provide hot water for devotees as well. Needless to say, most of the devotees who use this facility pay for it according to their capacity. It seems this tradition came to the region of Ladakh from Iran. Ever since, the local communities have not only nurtured this institution but sustained it too. Government too has contributed to the survival of this unique practice. Each year, the forest department contributes a fixed quota of fuelwood to the mosques. In the post-war period, it contributed 400 tonnes of fuelwood to these mosques.

Dependent economy

People in Kargil are surviving in a land-locked situation. Gone are the days when Kargil used to be at the centre of the silk route, bartering barley, wheat, mustard, apples and apricots against salt, wool and meat products. With the closing of the silk route and the creation of the Indian State, the region has become totally dependent on the State. Today, life in the region is fully dependent on food and fuel supplies from the plains (Figure 1).

Over 12 000 tonnes of grain are imported into the region each year. If petroleum products and other essential commodities are



Figure 1: A convoy of trucks waiting to move on carrying civil supplies

Indian army website

also considered, the situation is much more severe from the point of view of a community that was, not long ago, leading a self-sustaining life. Each year, over 5 million litres of petroleum products and over 700 tonnes of fuelwood are consumed in the region. With the population projected to increase at a growth rate of 47 per cent every ten years, the dependence is bound to increase.

A distressing feature in the development process has been the culture of subsidies and hand-outs. In the entire Ladakh region of which Kargil is a part, subsidies constitute a substantial portion of developmental expenditure, which multiplies many times in the wake of a conflict. This has virtually destroyed such qualities as self-reliance, sustainability and even self-respect; so vital for an area that remains cut-off from other parts of India for many months each year,

Kargil poses a development challenge that warrants a radical shift in the present developmental design. There can be no two opinions as to the necessity to change the strategy for economic development of the region. An integrated developmental model taking into consideration the natural constraints and available resources of the area needs to be evolved and implemented at the earliest opportunity if the people of the region have to ensure a



Figure 2: The future depends on qualities of self-reliance, sustainability and self respect

Michel Dalle, Website: <http://gallery.uu.net.be/Michel.Dalle/>

future for themselves. The new model needs to be built on the traditional way of life, avoiding the problems created and dangers posed by the present system, and adopting new and appropriate technologies and paradigms to achieve greater productivity and efficiency at all levels, with a maximum of self-sufficiency as the ultimate goal.

There are no easy solutions for a region that is faced with natural and manmade uncertainties. It is both a challenge as well as an opportunity to address the livelihood needs of the region.

Dr Sudbirendar Sharma is a New Delhi-based energy analyst and Editor of the Rural Energy Journal. He can be reached at: sudbirendar@vsnl.net. The paper is based on the study he conducted during the war of 1999 in Kargil. ☪