

Conduct of Junior Leaders in Counter Insurgency Operations - A Decisive Factor Brigadier PS Mann, SM, VSM (Retd)*

Junior leaders are the mainstay of the Indian Army (IA) and have time and again turned the tide against heavy odds owing to their superior training, high level of motivation, grit and extreme sacrifice. They have been greatly responsible for achieving victory in many a battle which has changed the course of history. Equally, their performance in Counter Insurgency (CI) Operations has been creditable, though their heroics are often obscured in this protracted, messy war with its peculiar characteristics. Junior leaders play a significant role in the resolution of this conflict as they, with their outfits operate in proximity to the local population and carry out physical destruction of the insurgents and their war material. But they must appreciate that the CI operations are carried out in full public view and under the gaze of the media, human rights organisations and a host of other social watchdogs. Therefore, their acts of commissions and omissions are susceptible to public/media scrutiny and legal investigations. Personal conduct of Junior leaders and that of their command thus ought to be exemplary. In the past there have been instances, where certain individuals, particularly at the lower levels of command, have taken recourse to certain disgraceful acts such as extra judicial killings, fake encounters, illegal confinement, torture, molestation and killing of innocent civilians. These violent acts, if proved, are punishable under the law, tarnish the image of the IA and consequently derail the process of reconciliation.

Our strategic vision and concept of CI operations clearly spell out the rules of engagement with the two well defined constituencies - insurgents and the people which are to be addressed in the combat zone. The former with an iron hand to isolate them from the public, to neutralise their influence ; and the latter with a soft and humane approach to restore their confidence, faith and trust in the Indian Constitution and to realign them to the national mainstream. The fundamentals of this policy are to ruthlessly avoid collateral damage and loss of innocent lives. It is to the credit of IA that, in consonance with the above policy, it has been able to successfully contain insurgency in the North East and J&K. Peace has returned to Mizoram, Tripura and now Nagaland. Overwhelming participation of people in the recently held assembly elections in Assam and "Panchayat" polls in J&K, ignoring the boycott call by the secessionists, are encouraging signs of peace returning to these states. Our doctrinal and strategic approach, in managing this warfare, therefore, is sound and has withstood the test of time.

On the other hand, use of brute force to include aircraft, armed helicopters, drones, guns and tanks by the NATO forces and Pakistan Army in the Af-Pak region has caused excessive collateral damage and loss of innocent lives. This belligerent approach has further alienated the people and strengthened the hands of the Taliban and Tahreek-e-Taliban (Pak) that are now more resilient and aggressive than ever before. The area has become the most volatile part of the world with far reaching regional and global security ramifications. "Those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it", said Napoleon. My Lai massacre, the mass murder of as many as 500 unarmed villagers, in Vietnam, under the command of second lieutenant William Calley, the US Army, on 16 March 1968 and torture and abuse of prisoners/suspects at Abu Ghraib (Iraq) by US soldiers² are heart-rending incidents. Recently, three American soldiers mercilessly killed some Afghan civilians, chopped off their organs to be kept as souvenirs. The perpetrators of all these crimes have been severely punished under the US judicial system. The IA too has had a fair share of such violent acts that need to be condemned in equal measure. The guilty in these cases also have not been spared.

Nathaniel Fick a former US mariner, who served both in Afghanistan (2001-2002) and Iraq (2003) has detailed some illuminating facets of CI operations in his article "Warfare Without Shooting"³ written, taking account of recent events in Afghanistan. During his visit to Afghanistan Counter Insurgency Academy (established by the US Army near Kabul) he asked students to list three targets they would aim for if they were leading forces in Zabul province, a Taliban stronghold. A US officer rattled off the names of three Taliban leaders to be captured and killed while an Afghan officer replied, "first we must target the local council to see how we can best help them; then we must target the local mullahs to find out their needs and let them know that we respect their authority." In CI operations, Nathaniel stated, "targeting is more about whom you bring in than whom you take out." He further emphasised that "counter insurgents must excel at finding creative, non-military solutions to military problems."

Mao-Tse-Tung (Chinese revolution 1926-1949) had viewed people as a reservoir of sympathy and support; a sea in which 'Red Guerrillas' could swim.⁵ As early as September 1927, he had issued instructions, popularly known as 'six points of attention', for guerrillas to observe while dealing with the locals to avoid any untoward incident and to win over their support. The forces engaged in CI operations must make every effort to deny insurgents the chance to freely swim in this sea of humanity. This can best be achieved through meticulously planned surgical strikes, based on actionable intelligence to destroy insurgents and avoid collateral damage on the one hand and a fair and exemplary conduct recognising and respecting the identity of innocent law abiding local population on the other.

Most of the time we get swayed by 'body counts' and number of weapons recovered as a token of operational performance of units/subunits in a CI Grid. While destruction of hostiles is equally important, it should not be at the cost of alienating the local population. Occasionally, exuberant result seeking units/subunits and individuals have resorted to unconstitutional acts like fake encounters, extra judicial killings, torture of suspects and even victimisation against locals with the sole intention of gaining recognition, honours and awards. These actions are not only illegal and unethical but against all norms of CI operations - reminiscent of the barbaric behaviour of an 'occupational army'. Junior leaders must refrain from such murky affairs despite any provocation or inducement. These actions are counterproductive and neither help the cause nor, bring any glory to the unit/subunit or the individual concerned. Instead, they reflect on the professional impropriety of the concerned officer. Often such actions inspire the local youth to join hands with the insurgents to avenge the brutalities and humiliation inflicted on their people.

CI is a complicated, difficult and messy warfare. Due to its peculiar characteristics and nuances, these operations require years of painstaking effort to build intelligence network, master the art of guerrilla warfare and win back the trust and confidence of the locals. Recent operation 'Geronimo' was the result of a meticulous effort of 10 years by the American CIA sleuths to trace Osama bin Laden and pin him down at Abbottabad (Pak) in one of the most daring surgical raids carried out by the US Special Forces-Navy SEAL (Team 6) in the history of modern warfare. It was like 'searching a needle in a hay stack'. Protracted nature of this war often leads to ambiguity, frustration, insanity and

loss of patience, mainly due to lack of results and the casualties suffered at the hands of wily insurgents. Soldiers, who are not adequately conditioned, both physically and psychologically, often succumb to these pressures and fatigue. Complacency and ennui amongst troops deployed in CI operations have rarely escaped the prying eyes of the crafty insurgents, inviting their deadly strikes resulting in loss of men and material. This apparently hurts the honour and prestige of a soldier. Humiliated and infuriated by the ghastly, gory site-remnants of a terror strike, troops often go berserk leading to punitive attacks against innocent civilians. Such heinous crimes are deplorable and against the basic tenets of CI operations and will certainly and justifiably invite legal retribution.

Another belief that persists in the minds of our young officers is that army is made to fight insurgents with their 'hands tied behind their back' and that army should be given a free hand to manage the conflict. In a democratic system, rules of the game are formulated keeping in mind our constitutional and judicial parameters. At the same time enough powers like 'Armed Forces Special Powers Act' have been vested in the security forces for successful management of this kind of conflict. Adequate safeguards have been provided to a soldier to enable him to perform his duty in an effective manner and to shield him from vilification.

No one has ever perfected the art of warfare. In all humility we must accept it to be a continuous learning process as the price of mistakes committed in combat are rather heavy. It is more so in CI operations where gains of years of painstaking effort can be ruined due to a single immature, disgraceful act committed by a unit/subunit or a combatant. The US and NATO forces in Afghanistan have realised that unless they win over the sympathy and support of the Afghans, winning battles alone is not enough for a lasting solution to the conflict. CI operations have become very complex because of the internal and external influences. Terrorism has added a new dimension to this warfare and has compounded the problems of a soldier. In this intricate situation the ethics and conduct of junior leaders in CI operations has gained added importance. Common factor between the insurgents and the security forces are the people whose support in the final analysis, will decide the outcome of such a conflict. They will do well to never allow their focus to deviate from the old maxim; "Help people, defend people and respect people". "When the strategy is right and the tactics are right the war will be won in no time", a proverb often referred to by the Vietcong during the Vietnam War (1946-1975) holds true in all facets of warfare even today. A dichotomy in this regard will only add to confusion and frustration leading to a costly and wasteful effort.

***Brigadier PS Mann, SM, VSM (Retd)** was commissioned in 1st Guards (2nd PUNJAB) and also commanded the same. He served as a Military, Naval and Air Attaché in Ethiopia and Defence Attaché in Kazakhstan. After commanding an Infantry Brigade he served as Commandant, CIJW School and retired as BGS, HQ, ARTRAC on 31st Jan 2001.

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